

# A Gift for a Lion

By

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- Harlequin Presents edition published July 1977

- ISBN 0-373-70695-2

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- **CHAPTER ONE**

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- Sun, Joanna thought drowsily. Golden, glorious sun. She sighed luxuriously, pillowing her head on her arms. Oh, but it was good to be here, away from Father's disapproval and Aunt Laura's bleat of 'But what will people say...?'

- Joanna grinned to herself at the thought of what Aunt Laura would say if she could see her now, stretched at her ease on the deck of the *Luana*, the top of her bikini unfastened to complete the perfect tanning of her smooth back, with a makeshift towelling screen to shield her from the gaze of everyone else using the tiny Mediterranean harbour of Calista.
- The *Luana* had dropped anchor there on the previous evening, but neither Joanna, nor her cousins Mary and Tony Leighton or Mary's fiancé Paul, had possessed sufficient energy to go ashore. They had simply eaten on board and turned in. But in the morning the boys had decided to go ashore for supplies and to see what entertainment Calista might have to offer and Mary, who appeared, Joanna thought a little disdainfully, to live in Paul's pocket, had immediately volunteered to go with them. Joanna, however, had refused.
- Calista might be picturesque, with its white houses and gaily tiled roofs crowding almost to the water's edge, but it was also definitely scruffy, she had decided, and the harbour, with its bobbing boats of every shape and size, smelt.
- Also, if she was honest, it was in many ways a relief to get away from Mary's constant chatter and enjoy a couple of hours of absolute peace and relaxation. Joanna suppressed the thought, feeling guilty. After all, if Mary had not agreed to come, Joanna herself would have been denied the trip. However modern and forward-looking her father might have been on the bridge of his ship or in the world he now controlled from his eyrie in a Whitehall office block, he was quite mediaeval in his view about what decent girls did or did not do. And in his book a decent girl did not go off alone on a Mediterranean cruise on a sailing boat with a single man, even if he was her cousin and in every likelihood her future husband as well. Hence the invitation to Paul and Mary to accompany them.
- It was only too likely that Tony, who had been summoned for a private interview with her father before the trip, had also received a stern lecture on the kind of behaviour Rear-Admiral Sir Bernard Leighton expected from anyone escorting his only daughter. Certainly he had emerged from her father's study very red around the ears, Joanna thought, her lips curving slightly at the memory. At any rate, Tony's behaviour towards her had been circumspect in the extreme, and Joanna had been content for this to be so. She found Tony's tentative lovemaking very pleasant, but not wildly arousing, and she felt as long as he did not try to rush her into anything, they could probably achieve a very satisfactory relationship in time.
- Sometimes she even wondered wryly whether Tony was not just a little in awe of her, but she was not so sure that this was such a bad thing. One thing she had decided quite a long time before, and that was that freedom and independence were essential in marriage. Tony, she was certain, would never try to dictate to her or dominate her in any way, and this was one of the reasons that made marriage to him seem so attractive. Joanna had lived with one dominating male—her father—already, and while she had never experienced any real difficulty in twisting him round her finger to obtain anything she really wanted—this cruise, for instance—it was often a wearing and time-consuming process. Joanna's next permanent relationship was going to be an altogether easier affair, she decided, smiling sleepily.
- 'Ahoy, *Luana* !' It was Tony's voice, and she hastily fumbled with the strings fastening her bikini top before sitting up. Mary scrambled aboard from the dinghy first. Her face was flushed and there were beads of perspiration on her nose. She was carrying two bulging straw baskets. Joanna watched her with slight compunction. Poor Mary hadn't had much of a trip so far. She didn't care much for sailing and had been violently seasick when they ran into some bad weather in the first few days. She was by no means an expert swimmer either, and tended to blister in the very hot

sun. In fact, Mary was never happier than when she was below decks in the tiny galley preparing food for the four of them. She and Paul were marrying in the autumn, and Mary had been taking *acordon bleu* course in preparation.

- When she saw Joanna, she gave one of her irritating little shrieks. 'Oh, Joanna I You haven't gone to sleep and got burned, have you?'
- 'No, of course not.' Joanna tried to keep her irritation out of her voice. It's a glorious day. Is there anything interesting ashore?'
- 'There was a sort of market,' Mary said. 'Lovely fresh vegetables. I might do gazpacho for supper.'
- 'It's not exactly a tourist's paradise,' Tony complained. He threw himself down on the deck cushions beside Joanna and unbuttoned his shirt. 'There are a few bars for the locals and one that does duty as a night club, and that's your lot. Shall we push on somewhere else?'
- 'Oh, I rather fancy the night club for a change.' Joanna said lightly. In truth, she would just as soon have taken the boat elsewhere, but some imp of perversity made her gainsay Tony to see what his reaction would be.
- He leaned forward and brushed her shoulder lightly with his lips.
- 'Right then, love. The night club it shall be, though I suppose I shall spend the evening protecting you from the local lechers.'
- 'I can protect myself.' Joanna protested, a little pettishly, and he smiled at her.
- 'I've brought you a treat. Would you believe—an English newspaper?'
- 'Lord! How many days behind the times?' Joanna said as he handed it to her. She opened it at the social pages and cast a casual eye over the engagement notices, but none of her friends were among them. Engagements seemed to be going out of fashion, she thought. Trial marriages were the 'in' thing, but not, she was secretly relieved to acknowledge, where her father was concerned. She glanced dismissively over some of the items on the front page, ignoring the discussion between Paul and Mary on whether they should have a light or a heavy lunch.
- 'Anything interesting?' Tony squinted over her shoulder.
- 'The usual mess. Another big bank robbery in London. A row in the House of Commons over cuts in spending. Some Red scientist defecting from a conference in Venice.' Joanna tossed the paper to the deck. 'But it's all so out of date. World War Three could have started without us.' She looked impatiently at Mary and Paul. 'Oh, do stop it, you two. It's too hot for anything but salad anyway, and I hope you've brought some decent cheese.'
- 'Yes, o queen,' Paul muttered. 'Come on, darling. We'll get things started.'
- Joanna looked after them as they disappeared down the companionway and there was a bright spot of colour in each cheek. Tony touched her arm gently.
- 'Joanna?'

- She looked at him uncertainly. 'Is that what I'm like?'
- He hesitated. 'A bit—but it doesn't matter to me, love, because I know you don't mean it. Having your own way over things comes naturally to you, somehow, and of course Uncle Bernard being as he is .. '
- 'What do you mean?' She stared at him.
- 'Well, darling, he is—Rear-Admiral Leighton. I know he has a desk job these days, but he does still give the impression of being on a quarterdeck somewhere supervising a keelhauling, and—sometimes—it takes some getting over.' His voice died away a little unhappily.
- Joanna said tautly, 'I see.' She stared hard at the immaculate polish on her toenails. 'I'm sorry, Tony. I'll try and be a little less—regal from now on.'
- He nuzzled her shoulder. 'I think you're perfect,' he whispered.
- 'Then you're a fool,' she said, but smiled, robbing the words of their sting. 'I think perhaps the queen had better make amends by helping with lunch.' She got to her feet, slim and lithe in the minuscule black bikini, but somehow the golden day seemed less radiant, she thought.
- In her attempt to be amenable, Joanna not only helped Mary prepare lunch but insisted on clearing away and washing up afterwards, while Mary sat in the most sheltered corner of the deck with a selection from the stock of paperback thrillers they had found in one of the fitted cupboards in the saloon.
- As she tidied the last of the cutlery away and wiped down the surfaces, Joanna could hear the murmur of voices from the saloon and guessed that Paul and Tony had got the charts out to plan the next stage of their trip.
- Tony loved sailing, she thought, pushing a strand of bright auburn hair back from her damp forehead. It was a pity in many ways that he had no boat of his own. He had been loaned *Luana* by the senior partner of the firm of architects where he and Paul both worked. Both the partner and his wife were keen sailors and kept the boat moored at Cannes, spending as much of the summer as they could in the South of France. This year, however, they had gone to Canada, where their eldest son was being married, and Tony and Paul had been offered the use of the boat.
- Joanna looked round with slightly critical eyes. *Luana* was fine for two, she thought, but definitely crowded for four. Not for the first time, she toyed with the idea of persuading her father to give Tony and herself a boat as a wedding present. They could spend their honeymoon on board, she thought, at the same time acknowledging that her father would not really approve of the idea. She could almost hear his voice— 'Behaving like a lot of damned hippies.'
- His idea of a honeymoon would be a luxury hotel in Paris or Rome, she decided with amused impatience.
- On the whole, he seemed quite pleased with the idea of her marrying Tony. His only complaint was that Tony had become an architect, instead of joining the Navy as his uncle had suggested, but eventually he admitted that at least this decision showed that the boy had some mind of his

own. Tony must take after his father, Joanna thought, because both Mary and Aunt Laura were hardly strong characters. Her father had taken the whole family under his rather formidable wing when Anthony Leighton had died suddenly of a heart attack some years before. Mary and Joanna were only a few months apart in age, and Sir Bernard had arranged for them to attend the same school, apparently under the conviction that they would be ideal companions for each other. He had also hoped that Aunt Laura would provide Joanna with the mother she had lost while still a baby.

- None of it had really worked out at all, Joanna thought ruefully. She and Mary had barely anything in common except the family name. Mary was inches shorter than she was and inclined to be dumpy, and she was some-times quick to show resentment of her taller, more attractive cousin. And while Tony had always appeared totally oblivious to the difference in financial standing between both halves of the family, both Mary and Aunt Laura had made no secret of their awareness that they were the 'poor relations' of the Leighton family.
- In a way, Joanna was thankful that Mary had met Paul and fallen in love with him and settled her own future so painlessly. She would no longer feel obliged to see that Mary received the same party invitations as herself. Not that Mary had ever been particularly grateful for Joanna's efforts to broaden her social life. Joanna had gone through a fairly prolonged art college phase, before eventually recognising the limitations of her talent, and Mary had not approved of the circle of friends she had acquired as a consequence. Mary had an almost suburban horror of 'getting talked about', and Joanna admitted it was fair to say that some of the past exploits of members of her circle had enlivened the gossip columns of some of the less responsible daily papers, while she had grown quite accustomed to her own doings being highlighted in the social pages of glossy magazines.
- On top of that, there had been regular battles with her father, who had condemned all her friends out of hand as 'hippies and long-haired layabouts'. At first Tony had been someone to grumble to occasionally about her father's uncompromising attitude, but soon she began to enjoy his companionship for its own sake, and not merely because he was her cousin and happened to be handy. Probably that was why her father had made so little demur about their relationship. He was undoubtedly relieved that she seemed to have chosen someone who corresponded fairly well to his idea of an eligible young man.
- She looked into the saloon, thick with the smoke from Paul's pipe, and grimaced at the charts spread over the folding table.
- 'Where next, Marco Polo?'
- 'Corsica, we think, eventually, but we're going to stop here first.' Tony's finger stabbed a point on the chart. 'Saracina. It's only a tiny island, but it sounds quite interesting and it's only a couple of hours from here. Rocky, of course, but with a few nice bathing beaches.'
- 'Well, that's what we want,' Joanna said lightly. 'Nothing too civilised.'
- Paul got up and stretched, knocking his pipe out into a large pottery ashtray. 'I'll go and see what Mary's doing, I think.'
- Tony watched him go with a grin, then turned to Joanna, holding out his arms and drawing her down on to his knee. 'That's what is known as a tactical—and tactful—withdrawal,' he mentioned.

- 'Tact isn't the quality I most associate with Paul,' Joanna muttered.
- 'I wish you liked each other better. He's a great guy when you get to know him—and we shall all be related in the near future.'
- 'When he marries Mary.' She took a strand of his fair hair and wound it round her finger.
- 'I wasn't just thinking of that.' He pulled her head down to him and kissed her on the mouth. It was a long kiss, more intimate than those they usually shared, and Joanna found herself enjoying the pressure of his lips and the movement of his warm hands on her half naked body. Nice Tony, she thought, almost drowsily, realising that she was allowing him more licence with his caresses than she normally permitted. But when his straying fingers penetrated into the bra top of her bikini, she drew away at once.
- 'Oh, Jo,' Tony groaned. 'What's wrong?'
- 'Nothing's wrong. You know the rules.'
- 'By heart. As formulated by Rear-Admiral Sir Bernard Leighton, R.N.—to name only a few.' He sounded sulky and she gazed at him, concerned.
- 'But I thought you agreed...'
- 'Of course I did. I would have agreed to anything to get you away with me. Now you're here and—nothing's really different, is it? Big Daddy's influence reaches a long way.'
- 'That's horrible.' She twisted away from him and stood up.
- 'I'm sorry,' he sounded tired. 'It's just that I thought once we were out of sight, we would also be out of mind.' He gave a short, bitter laugh. 'I meant to keep my proto your father, but it did cross my mind that there could come a time when we would be so carried away that nothing would matter except each other. I feel like that whenever I'm with you, but I'm beginning to realise I'm on my own.'
- 'Are you saying I'm frigid?' Joanna questioned him furiously.
- 'No—far from it. I think there's a vibrant, passionate woman waiting to be awoken in you, Jo. But she'll never come alive while you're so much under your father's thumb. I've wondered a few times if what you need isn't a man who could dominate you even more than he does. Someone your father wouldn't dare to take aside on your wedding day and order to be gentle with you on your first night. Someone who'd tell the old boy to mind his own damned business.'
- Joanna looked down unseeingly at the littered charts, her eyes blurred with tears. If you think Daddy interferes too much in my life, it's only because he loves me,' she whispered. 'I thought you loved me, Tony. Don't you want to protect me—or would you prefer it if I'd slept around with every man I'd met since I was sixteen?'
- 'Of course not.' He got up and came over to her, drawing her against him with gentle hands. 'Love, if I've upset you, I'll cut my throat. It's just so—frustrating sometimes, having you so near. Probably your father was right to say what he did to me. He certainly seemed to know more

about what I'd be feeling than I did.'

- He kissed her again, but this time the caress was deliberately light. When he let her go, Joanna stood on tiptoe and brushed his mouth with hers.
- 'You're so wrong, Tony,' she murmured. 'I don't want another dominating man. I want a real partnership.'
- 'I'll just have to hope that's what you continue to want,' he said, firmly putting her away from him. 'I could use a drink. I'll go and see what the others want.'
- While he was gone, Joanna tidied away the charts and collected some cans of iced lager from the refrigerator unit in the galley. She wanted a few moments to allow her emotions to calm down before she presented herself on deck.
- She was startled and a little worried by Tony's outburst. Startled, because of the sudden depth of feeling he had displayed and worried by the possibility of future friction between her father and himself.
- She sighed. Maybe the close proximity they had been forced into since the cruise began had something to do with it. It was a strain with the four of them living so close together. They had all become edgy, and an evening ashore even with Calista's limited night life might be good for them all, she thought optimistically.
- Hours later she was convinced of it. Surrounded by a shouting, laughing crowd, bumped and pushed but loving every minute of it, she danced to every beat record that the *trattoria's* ancient jukebox could provide. She had dressed with daring simplicity in a pair of stark white trousers, fitting closely over her hips and flaring towards the ankles, and a brief halter-necked black top which made the most of her tan. She had caught her slightly waving mass of coppery hair up off her neck, securing it with a black velvet ribbon. Her wide hazel eyes sparkled, partly through excitement and partly because of the rough red wine which was Calista's most acceptable drink.
- She knew she was the cynosure of every male eye, and the knowledge delighted her. She was delighted too at the way Tony stuck determinedly to her side, making sure that no one got an opportunity to pester her. There was an expression in his eyes when he looked at her that made the back of her neck tingle pleasantly. She even found herself wondering whether it would be possible for them to return to the boat on their own for a time. She knew what she was inviting, and the thought made her pulses throb uncertainly. Was that what she wanted, or was she merely letting the wine and the music take over? Suddenly she didn't know any more, and when Tony reached out and took her into his arms on the crowded space between the tables that served as a dance floor, her hands came up at once to push him away.
- 'Darling, don't be silly. It's the wrong sort of music for that.'
- 'Oh, Jo, I want you,' he said huskily.
- 'What we both want is more wine,' she spoke lightly, trying to dispel the awkward moment, caught suddenly in two minds and uncertain which one to choose. 'Come on, I'm parched. We'll go back to the table.' She edged her way, laughing and acknowledging greetings and frankly appreciative comments as she went.



- Tony followed, his good-looking face mutinous. 'I don't like hearing you spoken to like that.'
- 'Like what?' She looked at him over her shoulder. 'Don't tell me you could understand what they were saying.'
- 'I don't have to be a language expert to read their minds,' he retorted sullenly.
- 'Well, what people are thinking is a matter of supreme indifference to me,' she flung at him as they joined Paul and Mary, who were sitting at a candlelit table in the corner making rather laborious conversation interspersed with many gestures with two local fishermen.
- They rose and bowed admiringly as Joanna dropped into her chair. Then the conversation began again. How long were they staying in Calista? Only until tomorrow? But that was a tragedy, to think that *thesignorina* would never dance in *thetrattoria* again. Where were they going next?
- 'Oh, that's easy,' Paul said. 'We decided that this afternoon, didn't we, Tony? We're going further down the coast to a little island called Saracina, and we'll tie up there for a night or two... What's wrong?'
- The taller of the two fishermen had seized his arm with an alarmed expression.
- 'Not Saracina,' he said, shaking his head for greater emphasis. 'Not Saracina. Not good.'
- 'What's wrong with the place?' Tony leaned forward. 'Surely it's inhabited.' He enunciated slowly and carefully, 'People—live—there.'
- Both men nodded vigorously. 'You keep away. Not good. Not want—visitors.'
- Joanna spoke coolly and incisively, her words aimed at Tony and Paul, who were exchanging concerned glances. 'Well, I'm afraid visitors are what they're going to get. It all sounds most intriguing, and I wouldn't dream of keeping away simply because the islanders want to remain exclusive.'
- The shorter fisherman, who had a moustache, broke in excitedly. 'We go there—fish—since two days. Men come in boats—with guns. You stay here. Not go to Saracina.'
- 'Gunboats?' Tony muttered. 'Hell's teeth! Perhaps we should keep away at that.'
- 'Oh, I don't want to go anywhere where there might be guns,' Mary said with a shudder.
- 'I've never heard such nonsense,' Joanna exclaimed impatiently. 'Maybe the fishing's private or something, and they want to keep the boats away, but we don't want to fish. We just want to tie up in one of the bays and spend the night. There's no harm in that.'
- 'Well, I think we should give it a miss,' Paul said, his voice stubborn.
- 'Oh, for heaven's sake!' Joanna threw herself angrily back in her chair. 'We've made our plans. Are you going to change them just because of a little scaremongering by a couple of fishermen? They probably got chased for— poaching or something, and are just making this story up to cover themselves for running away. There's nothing on the charts about Saracina being prohibited



to shipping. I insist that at least we go and see for ourselves.'

- Looking at Tony, she could see he was weakening, but Paul was made of sterner stuff.
- 'Well, I came on this cruise for some sunshine and a few laughs and to help Tony sail the boat,' he said. 'We've had plenty of sun, I'll admit, but the laughs are getting thinner on the ground all the time. One thing I'm not prepared to do is take my future wife anywhere where there could be danger of any sort. That's final, and if Joanna still insists on going, Mary and I will find a boat to take us to the nearest large port and go home.'
- Biting her lip with vexation, Joanna saw that Tony and Mary were both staring at him in open admiration. The two fishermen sat uneasily silent, obviously aware that the previously relaxed group were now in conflict over what they had said.
- Joanna forced herself to smile. 'There's no need to go to those lengths,' she said. 'If you feel so strongly about it...'
- 'I do,' Paul interrupted.
- 'If you really do feel so strongly,' she repeated, raising her voice a fraction, 'then why not spend another day and night here? I'm sure while we're anchored in their harbour and coming ashore spending money, the locals will be only too delighted to invent further fairy tales to prevent us from moving on.'
- 'Jo,' Tony murmured uncomfortably, 'keep your voice down, love. I'm sure some of these people can understand what we're saying. We've had a couple of very funny looks.'
- Paul got up, scraping his chair. 'Come on, darling,' he said to Mary. 'Otherwise I might say something to Her Majesty that we might all regret.'
- Joanna had already realised she had gone too far, and had been all set to apologise. But Paul's words halted the apology on her lips. After all, she thought, seething, it was Paul and Tony who had found Saracina on the chart and decided to make it the next port of call. All she had wanted was to stick to the arrangements that had been decided on. She disliked last-minute changes of plan, because in her experience they were invariably for the worse.
- The thought of spending a further day in Calista, suffering the resentment of Paul and Mary, appalled her. Besides, she had really wanted to go to Saracina. Still wanted to, in fact, in spite of everything that had been said.
- She drank some more wine, while the first germs of a plan began to ferment in her brain. So the others wanted to spend a day ashore here. Well, they were welcome to do so. She would take her bikini and a towel and some food and find a friendly boatman who would take her to Saracina. But she wouldn't tell the others what she intended to do. She would make the excuse she wanted to stay behind for another sunbathing session on *Luana*,
- Her spirits rose. There must be someone on Calista who would be willing, for a price, to take her to Saracina and leave her there for a few hours. She would have a whole day in blissful solitude, while the other three wandered round the same streets, avoiding the same donkey droppings and being taken for a ride by the same street vendors. And it would just serve them right for being so stupid. She came back with a start to the present to find that the two fishermen

were apparently taking their leave, leaning over Tony and talking rapidly in their own language.

- 'What were they saying?' she asked idly as they moved away across the smoky room.
- 'I don't know. Paul's the language expert, not me. I could only pick up about one word in twenty,' Tony frowned perplexedly. 'But they were still talking about Saracina, and I could have sworn that the short one said something about a lion.'
- 'First guns, now wild animals.' Joanna's smile was satirical. 'They must have a good reason for wanting us to keep away from there. Smuggling, I daresay.'
- 'Well, it doesn't matter. We're going to steer well clear of the place. I don't like the sound of any of it,' Tony said a little impatiently. 'And there's Corsica to look forward to. Don't forget that.'
- Joanna looked at him sideways under her long lashes. 'Oh, I won't,' she agreed sweetly.
- They were interrupted at that moment by one of the local young men who had summoned up the courage to ask Joanna to dance with him. In spite of Tony's evident disapproval, she agreed charmingly, telling herself he needed to be taught a lesson and did not deserve any particular consideration.
- She was much in demand for the remainder of the evening, as the local men vied with each other for a chance to partner her. It was all very flattering and a little heady, and as Joanna glanced through the crowd towards the table, she saw that Paul and Mary had returned and were sitting with their heads together with Tony. Criticising her, no doubt, she thought rebelliously. Well, she'd give them something to be critical about.
- At last Tony made his way through the crowd to her side. 'I think it's time we were going, Jo,' he said tautly.
- 'Oh, why?' she laughed up at him, buoyed up by the chorus of groans from the men around her.
- 'Because it's late.'
- 'It's not that late, and it was you who discovered this place anyway.' She knew she was being deliberately obstructive but told herself she didn't care. 'I'm enjoying myself, and I don't want to leave. You three go on back. I'm sure I can find someone to bring me back to the boat later on.'
- Tony looked furious. 'No chance,' he said grimly. 'We'll wait until it's convenient for you to leave.'
- Joanna watched him turn on his heel and walk away and sighed a little. She would have to leave, in spite of what she had said. She didn't want to give Paul and Mary any further ammunition for their complaints about her behaviour. And if she was truthful, she was tired herself.
- So she followed Tony back to the table, apologised meekly but with a glint in her eye for having kept them all waiting, and allowed herself to be shepherded back to the *Luana*.
- She had hoped that the wine and the dancing would have made Mary sleepy, but as they undressed awkwardly in a rather fraught silence in the tiny cramped cabin they shared, Joanna soon realised that Mary wanted to talk - and was merely biding her time. It was also obvious that

she viewed herself quite erroneously in the role of peacemaker.

- Mary was quite willing to acknowledge that Paul should not have said what he did, but neither, she pointed out, should Joanna always expect her own way.
- 'Tony's patience won't last for ever. After all, living with other people requires give and take,' she declared sententiously.
- 'Precisely,' Joanna agreed a little drily, allowing Mary's rather self-righteous remarks about making sacrifices for the person you loved and not always expecting to be the centre of attention to drift over her.
- But after her cousin's voice had died away and been replaced by quiet, steady breathing, Joanna lay awake, thinking.
- Mary had been right about one thing, she decided. There should be an element of give and take in a relationship. The main problem with her father and herself was that they both seemed to be takers, she realised a little wanly.
- It was not a particularly comfortable thought and she switched her attention to her plans for tomorrow with a pleasurable feeling of excitement. On her way through the saloon she had appropriated one of the local guide books that were kept on the boat, and now she reached up to the shelf above her bunk for the small torch she kept there.
- The book dealt mainly with the larger islands in the vicinity, like Corsica, Sardinia and Elba. Saracina, which lay to the north of Corsica, barely merited a paragraph, but that was probably as much as its size warranted, she thought. As if anyone would want to keep people away from a place that size!
- But as she read the book, she soon discovered that people had once been kept away with a vengeance. One of the features of Saracina, which appeared to be mainly rocky with a small fertile hinterland, was the remains of some old fortifications built by the islanders of long ago to keep away marauders like the Saracen Turks and Barbary pirates who had been the scourge of the Mediterranean one time.
- Joanna pursed her lips. In the ordinary way she would have enjoyed a visit to what was left of the fortifications. She liked scrambling around on historical sites and letting her imagination have full play. But this time, she felt she would stick to her original idea and find a quiet little beach to stay on, well away from Saracina town itself or any other centres of population that might exist. After all, on a beach she would be doing no harm to anyone, even hostile islanders who liked to emulate their ancestors by defending their privacy with guns.
- She tossed the book aside and lay down, switching off her torch, her mind roving as it sometimes did before sleep claimed her.
- 'I won't be selfish any more,' she thought drowsily. 'I will give Tony more consideration, and I'll make an effort to get on with Paul and not expect everyone to give way to me all the time.'
- But such virtuous resolutions deserved one final fling, she convinced herself—her trip to Saracina, before she settled down and became a solid citizen.

- She was almost asleep when the thought came to her, forcing her to sit up, fumbling once again for the guide book and the torch.
- But though she searched right through the book, nowhere, to her relief, could she find any reference to lions, past or present, on Saracina.

## • CHAPTER TWO



- Joanna never forgot her first view of Saracina. It rose out of the faint haze that hung over the sea, a black jagged shape against the unbroken blue of the sky and water. In spite of its rather forbidding aspect, she felt her pulses quicken, and that faint, strange excitement stirred in her stomach again.
- It had all been worth it after all, she thought exultantly. Getting to the island had proved to be no easy task. The first part of her plan had worked like a charm—if she discounted the obvious hurt she had inflicted on Tony by preferring her own company to his. She had almost been tempted to tell him about her good resolutions for the future—almost, but not quite. Breakfast had been an uncomfortable meal with Tony sulky and reproachful and Paul and Mary exchanging glances, at once pitying and superior.
- She had seen them safely on their way, then slipped into her black bikini which she topped with a simple white towelling shift with a cowl neckline. She piled her book, cosmetics and other belongings into a big straw beach bag, and went up on deck. It was a matter of moments, hailing a passing dinghy and persuading the owner to take her to the quay, but there her troubles began.
- It seemed the fishermen in the bar last night had not been alone in their desire to boycott Saracina. Her tentative inquiries about hiring a boat to take her there and bring her back in the late afternoon were met with shrugs, evasions and sometimes downright refusals, accompanied by a spit on the floor.
- Joanna began to feel thoroughly frustrated. She was afraid too that word might begin to spread through the little port that the English *signorina* with red hair was trying to get to Saracina and that Tony and the others might hear and arrive in time to prevent her. She had just begun to feel that she would have to abandon her quest, and return to *Luana* to spend the day after all, when someone mentioned the name Pietro. Immediately a ripple of laughter ran round the listening men, and Joanna, straining to follow the quick Italian, learned that Pietro was the one man who might be willing to risk a trip to Saracina in his boat, being, added her informant, tapping his head significantly, completely mad.
- Joanna was taken aback. She hardly wished to embark in a small boat with a lunatic, but she soon gathered from the halting explanations in very broken English from some of the other men that Pietro's madness lay rather in foolhardiness than in any actual mental deficiency.
- When the madman eventually appeared in a striped sleeveless vest and jeans covered in fish scales, Joanna thought with a hidden smile that he was the nearest thing to the answer to a maiden's prayer in every way that she had ever seen.

- Pietro appeared equally impressed. He managed to convey with much gesturing and eye-rolling that he would be overjoyed to convey *la bella signorina* wherever she might wish to go, and was desolate that anything as sordid as money had to enter into the transaction.
- But on this point, Joanna was firm. She did not want her trip with Pietro to be on anything but a strictly business footing. Judging by the speed with which he recovered from his broken heart and stowed the generous amount of money she gave him in some mysterious pocket in his vest, Joanna guessed he probably had a strong-minded wife and several children not too far in the background.
- As they pulled away from the quayside, Joanna saw that some of the boatmen she had spoken to were standing watching them depart. But there was none of the calling, waving and handkissing which usually attended departures. The men's faces were unsmiling, and some were almost contemptuous, Joanna thought resentfully. She got the impression that while Pietro could be mad, and accepted as such with a shrug, she was regarded as a fool, and a fool who was also a woman, which condemned her utterly.
- She was glad to turn her back on the harbour wall and the row of watching figures and lift her face to the open sea, revelling in the movement of the boat and the slap of the little waves against the bow. A day out of time, she thought exultantly. A day that belonged to her. It was a strangely exhilarating thought and she began to smile. Behind her at the tiller, Pietro started to hum a tune in a loud but not unmusical voice. It was one of the tunes that had been chosen most often on the jukebox the previous evening, she recognised, and after a moment or two she joined in with him.
- In snatches of conversation between songs, she learned that he was from Genoa and had married a girl from Calista where he now worked for her father. Joanna guessed that a day trip to Saracina, however much risk was involved, was probably preferable to being at his father-in-law's beck and call all day.
- 'We all want freedom,' she thought, smiling to herself, but the smile faded as she suddenly realised what she had implied. But she was free—wasn't she? All her life she had come and gone pretty well as she pleased. She had started and later discarded a number of possible careers including her abortive art college courses without any real pressure being applied by her father. She could have got a flat of her own, if she had wanted, but it had always seemed less bother to live at home. Now for the first time she began to wonder if, in her restless flitting between jobs and courses, she had sacrificed her only real chance of independence. Perhaps it had suited her father quite well to have her living under his eye, without the demands of a career to distract her from acting as his hostess and running his home.
- Much of her life, she realised, had centred so far on attending to her father's needs and considering his likes and dislikes. He invariably demanded that his home should be run like clockwork, but he always held aloof from any problems that arose, and Joanna had known from her early teens that he expected her to cope with staff and make all the everyday decisions that he preferred to avoid.
- If she married Tony, would she merely be exchanging one housekeeping job for another? It was an unexpectedly dismal thought, and she noticed with a slight shiver that she had said 'if she married, and not 'when' as if there was still a basic doubt in her mind. And it was no use thinking she was going to escape from her father's sphere by her marriage. She knew it was his intention to turn part of his large London house into a flat for them, and she recalled with some surprise that Tony had raised no objection to the plan when it was first hinted at. The reservations had all

been hers. She shook herself impatiently, trying to dispel her sombre mood, and grinned almost with relief when Pietro burst into a full-blooded rendering of 'O Sole Mio.'

- Her search for a boat had taken longer than she had realised, and it was well after midday when Saracina came into sight. She was watching it so eagerly that it was a few minutes before she realised that Pietro had stopped singing. Of course, it could just have been that he had exhausted his considerable repertoire of songs, but Joanna, glancing at him, noticed that his normally cheerful expression had been replaced by a faint, anxious scowl and that he kept scanning the horizon as if he was searching for something that he did not particularly want to find. She moistened suddenly dry lips. The sea around them seemed to empty. Apart from themselves, the only sign of life was that unwelcoming-looking lump of rock getting steadily nearer.
- If something happened—she preferred not to be too definitive about what—they could simply disappear into the tranquil water without trace, she thought uneasily. Of course Tony would know where she had gone. She had left a brief note on *Luana* explaining. And with any luck by the time she got back Paul and Mary would have said all they had to say about her wilfulness, selfishness and general pigheadedness.
- 'Nuts to them,' she thought inelegantly. 'From tomorrow I'll be so good, they'll award me the Nobel Peace Prize!'
- It was an odd feeling, standing on the silvery sand of the tiny bay, watching Pietro's boat with its tan sail disappearing round the rocky headland. So—they had come, and he had gone, and no one, gunslinger or islander, was any the wiser. In a way, it was all a bit of an anticlimax.
- She swung round to the towering cliff behind her, shading her eyes as she stared at the top. Nothing moved—not even a goat. There was a path of sorts leading to the clifftop, but she resolutely ignored it. She had made up her mind to stay on the beach, and Pietro had chosen this bay particularly because, he had intimated, it was furthest from the inhabited part of the island.
- She dropped her beach bag on to the sand and kicked off her pretty straw sandals. She was here, and the utter peace of this deserted cove was everything she had dreamed. And she had until five o'clock when Pietro was to return to her.
- She stripped off the towelling shift, throwing it carelessly down beside the bag, and walked into the faintly creaming shallows. The water felt warm to her feet, and she threw back her head, letting the slight breeze take her hair. She lifted her arms, almost in obeisance to the sun, and stood motionless for a moment before running forward and plunging into the slight swell of the sea.
- Tunelessly, thoughtlessly, she swam and floated and basked, feeling for the first time in her life that she was part of the elements, a creature of air, sea and sun. She plunged under the water, digging her fingers into the firm rippled sand on the seabed to find shells. She lay in the shallows, letting the tiny waves wash over her body. She had never known such tranquillity. She thought, 'I'm happy,' and wondered with a pang why the realisation should bring such a swift sense of desolation in its wake.
- Hunger eventually drove her back to the beach. She spread her coloured towel on a large flat rock near the water's edge and produced the lunch she had bought in Calista that morning. There were rolls filled with fresh chicken, some small sweet tomatoes and a huge bunch of black grapes. She had brought some cans of lager from *Luana*, but it was warm and she grimaced a



little as she tasted it, resolving to find a convenient pool to cool the remainder in during the afternoon.

- Seabirds came sweeping apparently from nowhere out of the dazzling air, screeching and squabbling over the scraps she threw them. When the food was gone, they went too—and that warm drowsy quiet descended again.
- Motionless on her rock, Joanna felt as if she was poised on the edge of the world. She stretched languidly, enjoying the feel of the sun and salt on her skin, then ran a tentative hand through her damp hair. She reached into her bag for a comb and began to tug it through the worst of the tangles. It was oddly relaxing sitting on her rock, smoothing her hair.
- 'I feel like a mermaid,' she thought dreamily, and giggled. She stretched out her legs, putting her ankles together and pointing her toes, imagining they were the tapering of a long silver tail. Anyone watching would think she was quite mad, she decided idly, and with the thought came a swift feeling of unease. She turned to the cliff again, scanning the top with narrowed eyes, but again all seemed quiet.
- She looked back at her legs, assessing them candidly, along with her general height and shape. A number of people had suggested to her in the past that she should take up a modelling career, but she had refused to consider it seriously, regarding it as overcrowded a profession as the stage and with as little chance of success. But now she was not so sure. About a month before she had met a leading fashion photographer, Gil Weaver, at a party and he had asked her outright if she would let him photograph her. At first she had thought he must be joking, but he had persuaded her that he was perfectly serious.
- 'You're not chocolate box, darling, but then I wouldn't want you if you were,' he said. 'But I like the way you look and move, and the way you wear your clothes instead of letting them wear you.'
- She had been really excited when she told Tony and her father about the conversation, pointing out that Gil Weaver had launched several very successful faces on their careers in the past, but the response from them both had been negative, even faintly hostile. Tony had been jealous, she knew, over the idea of her becoming closely involved even in a professional way with another man, but her father's reaction was less easy to assess. She had decided eventually that it was because she would be moving into a new world, where he had no influence, and it would therefore be beyond his power to help her with her career. He had also made it clear that he regarded it as little more than another of her whims, and that he did not expect it to last.
- But this time she would stick to it, she thought grimly, in spite of their opposition. She sighed a little, foreseeing battles ahead. She would have to convince both Tony and her father that this time she was not merely being wilful, but really wanted to carve out some sort of professional niche for herself.
- 'I'll use a different name too,' she thought. 'Then whether I succeed or fail, it will all be my own doing and no concern of the magic Leighton name.'
- She reached for her suntan oil and began smoothing it on to her shoulders and arms, pushing aside the straps of her bikini to make sure all her skin was covered. Then she paused. After all, she was quite alone and it would be more than a couple of hours before Pietro returned. This was her chance to acquire a proper tan at last, without the danger of strap marks spoiling its



perfection. And St Tropez was not so very far away, with its crowded beaches where people wore the absolute minimum without anyone raising an eyebrow, while here there was no one to see her at all—so... She pulled at the fastening of her bikini bra and dropped the tiny garment into her bag. There were many times on the *Luana* when she had longed to do the same, but she had been so rarely alone, and there had always been Mary to look shocked at her lack of modesty.

- She oiled and toasted her slim body without reserve, revelling in the warm rays of the sun. She knew that her father and Aunt Laura would be shocked beyond words if they could see her. All their worst forebodings about the Mediterranean would have come true, she thought, smiling to herself.
- When she had sunned herself sufficiently, she pulled her towel into the shelter of an overhanging rock, and lay down on her stomach in the shade. The air was shimmering and dancing in the full heat of the afternoon, and she closed her eyes against the glare from the surrounding rocks. The sea murmured drowsily in the distance and a soft drone of insects sounded in her ears. She thought 'I shall be asleep in a moment, but I mustn't... I mustn't...' even as she drifted away on a cloud of sweet oblivion.
- She never knew what woke her. She only knew that when she eventually turned her head, feeling the sand gritty under her cheek, her eyes focused suddenly on a pair of highly polished boots only a foot or two away from her recumbent form. And behind them, another pair. And just to the left, yet another pair.
- For a moment, she lay frozen, staring in disbelief, then with fingers made clumsy by shock and embarrassment, she snatched up her towelling shift and held it defensively in front of her as she sat up. -It was worse than any nightmare. There were at least half a dozen of them, all wearing some kind of dark green uniform with polished kneeboots. There were no guns actually being pointed at her, but each man wore a holster at his hip, she recognised, her stomach hollow with fear.
- She wanted to speak, but to her humiliation words would not come. Her throat was too dry. The silence seemed to go on for ever. The man nearest to her seemed to be in authority. He was wearing a peaked cap, and carried a cane. When at last he addressed her, to her shock it was in heavily accented but correct English.
- 'Be good enough to dress yourself, *signorina*, and come with us.'
- 'Come where?' she managed huskily.
- 'That is not for me to say or you to know. I have my orders. Please be quick. We shall not observe you.'
- He signalled to the other men, who obediently turned their backs, although Joanna caught two of the younger ones exchanging knowing and regretful grins. She was blushing to the roots of her hair by the time she had struggled back into her bikini top and dragged the shift on over it, but at least she was covered again, and a good measure of her assurance returned with the knowledge.
- She picked up her towel and shook it free of sand before folding it and stuffing it back into her straw bag. She knew the man in charge was watching her, and hoped he could not see that she was shaking, although whether fear or anger was the paramount emotion possessing her she

could not be sure. 'Come, *signorina* .' He put his hand on her arm.

- 'You won't get away with this,' she protested, hating herself for the involuntary tremor in her voice. 'My boatman will be returning for me soon and...' Her voice tailed away as she saw him slowly shake his head.
- 'It would be foolish to expect him, *signorina* ,' he said.
- 'But I gave him instructions,' she began.
- 'So did we,' he said gently. 'When we stopped friend Pietro not long after he left you here.'
- 'You haven't killed him?' she cried.
- 'But no,' he sounded almost reassuring. 'We are not savages.'
- 'Then let me go.' she said, despising herself for the pleading note in her voice.
- 'But where would you go, *signorina* ?' His tone was quite reasonable. 'You have no way of leaving the island, after all.'
- Suddenly Joanna moved, thrusting at him with her bag so that he involuntarily staggered back as it hit him on the chest. She ran then, twisting madly to evade the clutching hands of the others as they stumbled in the soft sand, straight towards the sea a few yards away. She had no rational idea of what she was going to do, but she was quite a strong swimmer and that headland was not all that far away. If she could only reach those rocks just beyond it, there was always a chance that Tony and *Luana* would come in search of her and rescue her before her would-be captors could reach her by way of the rocky coves. She could see no sign of a boat and guessed they must have come down the cliff to reach her.
- She was already waist-deep in water when the first man reached her. She fought him off furiously, striking him with her fists and nails, but he held her long enough for one of the others to reach them and then a third. She was carried, kicking and struggling, dripping wet out of the water, and dumped unceremoniously on the beach. This time they held her tightly by both arms and she knew with a sinking heart that her only chance of immediate escape had gone.
- Joanna felt cold and sick. She was out of her depth and she knew it. Reality was here in these hands which were bruising the soft flesh of her arms and in the dark, jeering faces of the men surrounding her. She closed her eyes to shut them out and as she stood silently, she heard someone make a low-voiced remark in his own language that was greeted with a shout of laughter. There was an indefinable note in that laughter that somehow alarmed her even more than anything that had gone before, and she swung to the man who spoke English.
- 'What did he say?' she asked, still breathless.
- 'Calm yourself, *signorina* . It was nothing.' His voice was grave, but she could see amusement flickering in his slanting dark eyes.
- 'I insist on knowing.' This time it wasn't a frightened forlorn girl who spoke, but Sir Bernard Leighton's daughter with a lifetime of demanding her own way behind her.

- For a moment he hesitated, then shrugged. 'And why should you not know, *signorina* ? It was an idle joke, nothing more.'
- 'And it referred to me?'
- 'Si.' He paused again, his lips twitched slightly. 'He spoke the truth, *signorina* . He said that such a wildcat would make a fine gift for the lion.'
- Again she felt that chill. The imprisoning hands and the crowding men were suddenly a threat almost too great to be borne. What did they mean—a gift for the lion?
- Her mind ran wildly on childhood legends, forgotten long ago, she had thought, but now surfacing in her consciousness to torment her. Stories she had read of human sacrifice to wild animals in arenas not so very far from this spot; of Theseus waiting in the dark of the Cretan labyrinth for the bull-man Minotaur.
- In spite of herself, she shuddered. Whatever hidden secret Saracina held, she wanted no part of it. She could bear anything—Tony's anger, Paul and Mary's recriminations—if only she was safely out of this.
- She told herself she was being ridiculous—letting her imagination run riot to feed her fear. And yet wasn't the fact that she was here, a prisoner in the hands of these men, equally ridiculous?
- 'Come, *signorina* .' She was being urged not altogether gently towards the cliff path, stumbling in the sodden ruin of her expensive sandals which she hadn't had time to kick off before her abortive escape bid. Her dress clung to her in clammy discomfort, and water dripped from her hair down her face and neck. How far were they expecting her to walk in this state? she wondered numbly. At the top of the cliff, she was answered. A small jeep stood waiting, the driver at the wheel.
- 'Get in, *signorina* .' The leader, his lips slightly compressed, spread her own towel on the seat for her to sit on.
- Joanna silently complied. She had no choice. The only cheering thought was that the men who had dragged her back from the sea were equally wet and uncomfortable as their uniforms steamed in the sun. One of them sat on either side of her and the leader climbed into the front beside the driver, giving some orders in his own language to the remaining men who presumably had to walk to wherever she was being taken.
- The jeep set off with a jerk which threw her sideways. She recovered her balance with as much dignity as she could. She still had no idea where they were going, she realised in dismay, but guessed it had to be the town of Saracina itself.
- She gazed around as they drove along the narrow road, white with dust that led away from the sea. In many ways it was little better than a track, she thought, gritting her teeth as the jeep jolted over a particularly deep rut. But it seemed as if she was to see something of the island after all, which had an irony all of its own.
- What she could see was rather as the guide book had described, rocky and rather arid, but the lower slopes were thickly covered in a bushy undergrowth, growing almost to the height of a man's waist in parts. Numerous flowering plants were to be seen amongst the greenery and a

warm, pungent smell wafted into the jeep as it sped along. There were few really memorable landmarks to guide her, however, even supposing she did manage to escape again. And if she did, was this necessarily the best way to come? Presumably the town of Saracina itself had a harbour. She tried to reckon how much money she had left after her payment to Pietro. Supposing she could get her hands on it, would it be enough to bribe someone to take her back to Calista?

- The scenery was gradually becoming more rugged, and the hills on each side were becoming steeper and developing a kind of grandeur. One of them, lying ahead of them slightly blurred by distance and heat haze, was almost tall enough to qualify as a mountain, Joanna thought, shading her eyes to look at it.
- But there were no people about, and not even any real houses, just a few tumbledown stone shacks with empty sheep pens attached to the side of them.
- She turned to one of the men sitting beside her.
- '*Dove tutti?*' Where is everybody?' she asked haltingly.
- The man shrugged and burst into a long excited speech in which the only really comprehensible word seemed to be '*palazzo*'.
- Wasn't that a palace? Joanna wondered dazedly. Did a tiny island like this really warrant such a place, or had she misunderstood? But before she could inquire further, the leader had turned angrily from the front seat.
- '*Silenzio!*' he barked, and her informant subsided, looking hot under the collar to add to his discomfort.
- The leader appeared to be feeling the heat too, for he was unfastening the jacket of his uniform and removing it, before handing it back to one of Joanna's escorts with a muttered instruction. The jeep was climbing steeply now and the mountain was looming over them. Joanna could see the white slash of a waterfall cascading down its side and she craned her neck for a better view. Perhaps when they reached the summit of this hill they were climbing, they would see the town and she would find out if the *palazzo* existed or not.
- The jeep breasted the hill and Joanna leaned forward eagerly, peeping round the driver's rather portly frame. But before she had more than a fleeting glimpse of clustering red roofs somewhere below them, and the vivid gleam of the sea again beyond, something dark and muffling was thrown over her head. She cried out hysterically, trying to fight herself away from the hot, smothering folds.
- From a long way off, the leader's voice said, 'I regret, *signorina*, this necessity, but you are neither to see nor to be seen. Those are my orders. You will be more comfortable if you stop this useless struggle.'
- She slumped in the seat, limp and wretched, conscious only of trying to breathe through the thick folds. It was his uniform jacket, she thought, and hoped vindictively that the seawater would ruin it.
- She lost all count of time, all idea of distance as they drove. Every jolt seemed somehow worse

now that she could not see, and she was flung about at every bend because she was unable to brace herself beforehand. She felt as helpless as a baby.

- The motion changed. Everything was suddenly much bumpier. A cobbled street? she wondered. The jeep swung sharply to the left and began to climb again. Then it halted abruptly and Joanna could hear men's voices talking. They were laughing again too. At her? In spite of the stifling heat of the jacket and her fear, she was suddenly searingly angry. How dared they treat her like this? When she discovered who was responsible, she would make them sorry they were born. 'Or perhaps they will do the same to you,' an insidious inner voice whispered, and anger gave way again to a shudder of fear.
- An order was shouted and they were moving forward again. More cobbles. An odd sound somewhere close at hand—water splashing. Could it be a fountain? The jeep stopped.
- 'Please to alight, *signorina* .' The request was as courteous as ever.
- It was good to be on her feet again, even if her legs did threaten to betray her if she took a step.
- 'There are some steps to climb. Giuseppe will help you.'
- She put out her hand and felt the sun-warmed stone of a wide balustrade. She lifted her foot, feeling for the edge of the step, and began to climb with Giuseppe making encouraging noises behind her.
- 'Only one more,' said the leader's voice. 'We have arrived, *signorina* . Soon you can be comfortable again.' He laughed. 'There is a reception committee waiting for you.'
- And then she heard it—the sound that lifted the hair on the back of her neck as it penetrated her blind, stifling helplessness. The long low, rumbling growl of a large animal.
- The sound seemed to fill her head, pressing down on her as the blackness dipped and swooped, and Joanna heard herself scream as, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

## • CHAPTER THREE



- She was lying on a hard, narrow bed in a small dark space. That was the first panic-stricken thought as she came reluctantly back to the surface of consciousness. But as her eyes became more accustomed to the dim light, she realised that she was lying on a couch in a small arched recess, protected from the room beyond by a massive carved screen in some dark wood.
- She sat up slowly, one hand to her head. She felt dizzy and rather sick and was just about to lie back again and wait for the spasm to pass, when she heard in the outer room the scrape of a chair and the sound of papers rustling.
- She was not alone. As Joanna assimilated this, she became aware of other things. That the coverlet which lay over her was heavy with embroidery, that the couch, although hard, was apparently a valuable antique and—a rather more shattering discovery—that she was wearing

nothing but a man's black silk dressing gown. She paused for a moment, letting the hot angry flush that suffused her body die away, then moving as stealthily as she was capable of, she pushed away the coverlet and slid to her feet.

- The exquisite mosaic floor was cold to her bare feet, but she moved on it noiselessly to the edge of the screen and looked around it.
- It was not a very large room, and the main item of furniture, apart from the shadowed shelves of books in expensive leather bindings which covered three of the walls, was an immense desk in the centre of the room. Joanna was unable to tell what time of day it was as heavy shutters had been drawn across the windows. A lamp on the desk, incongruously modern, was the room's sole means of lighting, but it was apparently sufficient for the man who sat at the desk, absorbed in the legal-looking document he was holding.
- She could not take her eyes from his face. He was not conventionally handsome, with that high-bridged nose and the sardonic curve of that thin-lipped mouth, but he was—arresting, she supposed. Her gaze took in the thick tawny hair hanging almost to the collar of his cream silk shirt, and the way his heavy lids hid the colour of his eyes.
- He reminded her of someone—she racked her brain trying to remember whom. It was something to do with a picture she had once seen—not a photograph. She felt instinctively it had not been as modern as that. And then she remembered. It was a reproduction in an art book she had once looked through—a portrait of some Renaissance prince—and he looked like this man who sat only a few yards away from her.
- Just as she was telling herself she was being absurd, he spoke, his voice low and resonant. 'I am not a peepshow, *signorina*.'
- Joanna flushed, angry that for all his apparent absorption he had known of her presence. She felt like a child again, caught peeping through the banisters at her father's guests.
- Instinctively she drew the dressing gown more tightly around her and re-fastened the sash, then lifting her head with an air of confidence she was far from feeling, she marched out from behind the screen and across the room to the desk.
- 'Who are you?' she demanded, hating the huskiness that nervousness had engendered in her usually clear voice.
- 'I am the master of Saracina.'
- The sheer arrogance of the simple statement almost took her breath away. She was aware that she was gaping at him, and furiously took control of herself.
- 'I see,' she said, allowing the inflection to be deliberately sarcastic. 'Then you can arrange for me to leave this island and return to Calista and my friends.'
- 'I could,' he agreed. He still not looked at her, but was studying the papers in his hand.
- She forced herself to give a light laugh.
- 'You speak as if there was some doubt.'

- 'No doubt at all, *signorina*. I could, but I will not.' He looked at her then, and she gasped as her eyes met his, tawny eyes, flecked with gold, vividly alive and wildly at variance with the almost patrician hauteur of his face and voice.
- 'Are you implying that I am some sort of prisoner here?' In spite of herself, she faltered over the hateful word.
- 'It is more than an implication, *signorina*. It is the simple truth. You are my prisoner, and you will remain here until I decide you may go.' He reached towards an ornate silver handbell on the desk. 'I will have Josef conduct you to the room I have had prepared.'
- 'Wait,' she spoke sharply, and flinched as his eyes flicked haughtily over her. 'I mean—this is ridiculous! You know nothing about me, or even who I am. You can't just keep me here against my will.'
- 'Even though you came here against mine?' He spoke softly, but a shiver drew an icy finger down her spine. She decided desperately that the only thing to do was brazen it out.
- 'If that is the case, then I'm sorry,' she said. 'I—I didn't realise this was private property. I can assure you I won't make the same mistake again.'
- 'But you will make different mistakes,' he said slowly. 'The mistake of lying to me, for example.'
- 'I haven't lied to you,' she protested, aware of the telltale pounding of her pulses.
- 'No? Then it was not you who danced in a bar at Calista last night? It was not you who quarrelled with your friends when you were all warned quite clearly to keep away from this place? The warning seemed definite enough to your friends. You are the only one who has chosen to disregard it. The only thing that need concern us now is your reason for doing so.'
- Joanna was silent. She realised she would rather die than admit to this haughty Italian—bandit—that she had come to Saracina out of sheer wilful perversity, precisely because she had been told not to.
- 'My reasons are private and need concern no one but myself,' she said eventually. 'It's true I was warned against coming here and equally true that I'm sorry I ever set foot on the place. Is that enough for you?'
- 'Alas, no.' If the words were regretful, the tone was not. 'You came, and for the present you must stay.'
- 'Indeed?' Joanna's nails bit into the palms of her clenched hands. 'You may change your mind when you hear who I am. My father is not entirely without influence, and when he hears about this—outrage...'
- The only outrage has been committed by yourself. You have trespassed where you had no right.' He sounded almost bored. 'And your identity is no mystery, Signorina Leighton.'
- He opened a drawer in the desk and removed a folder which he tossed across the polished surface to her. Joanna opened it almost mechanically, numbly registering that her name was neatly



printed on the manilla cover. Inside there was a photograph of herself, blown up from a newsprint of some months before, she noticed, as well as every press cutting in which she had ever been mentioned, all neatly tabulated.

- 'Where did you get hold of this?' she demanded huskily, throwing it down on the desk so that some of the contents spilled out.
- 'That need not concern you,' he said. 'But it may help to convince you of my sincerity when I say that your identity makes no difference to me at all. You are a very well known young woman.'
- 'And my father is a very well known man,' she completed for him, savagely. 'So you're going to hold me for ransom?'
- He sighed elaborately. 'No, *signorina*, I am not.' He opened the file again and looked at some of the cuttings, his brows raised. 'But if I did, what price would you put upon yourself, I wonder? Not very high, perhaps, if these are anything to go by.'
- She felt her cheeks grow warm. 'Are you sure they tell the whole story?' she asked, wondering why she should attempt to justify herself to this man.
- 'Young, spoiled, headstrong—the pattern doesn't seem to have altered greatly.' He closed the folder and tossed it back into the drawer.
- 'You seem to have gone to a great deal of trouble.'
- 'It is one way to become acquainted with a prospective guest.'
- Joanna's legs were shaking under her. Frowning a little, he waved her towards a highbacked chair with a leather seat, similar to the one he was already occupying. 'Sit down, *signorina*, before you fall down. My floor is hard and it would be a pity to bruise a second time such exquisite and utterly pampered skin.'
- She sat frozen as the implication of what he had said sank in.
- 'Whose dressing gown is this?' she asked unsteadily.
- 'It's one of mine.' He spread his hands in a mockery of an apology. 'It is not worthy of you, *signorina*, but with no women in the *palazzo*, suitable garments were difficult to come by in an emergency.'
- 'Emergency?' This wasn't—couldn't be happening to her. It was a nightmare, and oh God, let her waken from it soon.
- His voice went on. 'Your clothing—such as it was— was soaked from your ill-advised attempt to escape from my men. I could not leave you to catch pneumonia.'
- 'Then it was you...' The shame of it prevented her from finishing her words. The caress of the silk on her skin was suddenly abhorrent as she visualised herself naked and helpless under this man's disturbing amber gaze.
- 'Don't look so stricken, *signorina*,' he said crisply. 'You didn't deny my men the privilege of a

glimpse of your undoubted beauty. Am I supposed to be less human? Or would you have preferred their attentions?'

- Her eyes felt as if they were burning, but she was incapable of tears. Finally she lifted her head and looked at him. He was leaning back in his chair, out of the range of the lamplight, and his expression was hidden from her.
- 'If you wanted to totally humiliate me, then you have succeeded,' she said quietly. 'I can only hope that you're now satisfied and that I can leave without any further delay.'
- 'Has humiliation also rendered you deaf, *signorina* ? You are not leaving.'
- 'I think you must be mad!' she fought against the bubble of hysteria rising within her. 'You can't keep me here—surely you see that? My friends know where I am. They'll come and search for me, and you can't take all of us prisoner.'
- 'I have not the slightest intention of doing so, and I would not count on any search being made. Your friends believe that you are my willing guest.'
- 'Why should they believe that?'
- 'Because they have received a note, presumably from you, which tells them so, and asks them to send on your luggage.'
- 'They'll know it isn't from me. Tony knows my writing.'
- 'Then he will recognise your signature.' He tossed something across the desk to her. With a sinking heart she recognised her cheque card, taken no doubt from her wallet in the beach bag. 'Your style is a distinctive one, *signorina* .'
- 'So you're a forger as well as a kidnapper,' she flung at him. 'What a list of charges there'll be when I get free of this place, unless you mean to add murder to your other crimes!'
- 'Such hard words.' That detestable mockery was back in his voice. 'You did go to considerable pains to visit me, after all. Am I now to be blamed because I take equal pains to keep you here?'
- For a moment she stared at him impotently, then suddenly the tears came, slow and scalding, and she buried her face in her hands and gave way to them. A thousand miles away, it seemed, a bell was ringing, but she took no notice, even when a kindly arm assisted her out of the chair, and a voice encouraging her in heavily accented English murmured in her ear as she moved in a blurred, obedient dream to the door.
- The room itself was beautiful. In spite of the rage and humiliation that consumed her, she could appreciate that. She could also appreciate the fact that the door was locked and that exquisite wrought iron grilles effectively blocked the only other possible escape route through french windows on to a balcony beyond. The french windows themselves stood tantalisingly open, a soft evening breeze, warm and scented, wafting into the room.
- Lying across the enormous divan bed on her stomach, her chin propped in her hands, Joanna tried to think calmly and clearly about her predicament. She wept no longer. A phrase that the

much-loved nanny from her childhood had often used strayed into her mind. Temper's tears are soon dried, my dear.'

- Well, they were dried, and from now on she would keep her emotions under control. No matter what happened to her, he would never again see her collapse into a grovelling, tearful heap.
- The most irksome thing about her predicament was that she still did not know why she was being kept on Saracina. She frowned in real bewilderment. Surely he was not detaining her out of revenge, simply for trespassing on his property? In spite of the way that he had treated her, his face was not that of a petty person. She shivered slightly, remembering the ruthlessness of that mouth with the sensually curved lower lip.
- And she still did not know who he was—even though he seemed to be aware of every detail about her. The realisation of just how intimate his knowledge was sent the warm blood flooding to her cheeks again.
- The room itself gave no clue to his identity, she thought, looking round her. Compared to the sparse furnishings she had seen downstairs, it was positively sybaritic with its dramatic black and silver hangings against the palely washed walls. The floor glowed with deep terracotta tiles, with luxurious-looking goatskin rugs surrounding the bed. A dressing chest had been set against one wall, and Joanna noticed that as well as a valuable-looking antique mirror on a silver stand, it held a varied collection of cut glass bottles, presumably containing scents as well as other toilet requisites.
- She rolled on to her back, and stared up at the black silk curtains looped back at the head of the bed which, presumably, the occupant could release before going to sleep. She thought with a curl of her lip that such a diaphanous shield would only give an illusion of privacy at best. Her gaze wandered again to the barred windows and back to the dressing chest, and she sat up, gripped by a sudden disquiet. This was a woman's room—almost seductively so—and yet there were no women living at the *palazzo*. He had said so.
- She slipped off the bed, grateful for the caress of the soft goatskin under her bare feet, and padded across to the dressing chest. Her hand shook slightly as she reached for one of the bottles and withdrew the stopper. It was unmistakably 'Calèche'—one of her favourites. She replaced it quickly, her mouth suddenly dry, as she studied the other cosmetics that were laid out there. They were all brands she used regularly. That dossier of his seemed to be complete, she thought, with another spurt of rage. She was sorely tempted to send the whole lot crashing to the ground with one sweep of her arm, but common sense prevailed. She had no doubt that her host would retaliate by making her sleep in the over-exotic atmosphere such an action would create, and her nose wrinkled at the thought.
- She stared around again. A woman's room, filled with the sort of pretty toys that women loved, and men loved to give them. She thought, 'Silk and perfume and bars at the windows. It's like a harem.' And her hand crept to her throat as the idle thought assumed a nightmare reality.
- Was that—could that be why she was here? She tried desperately to think back over her conversation with the man downstairs. He had told her he was the master of Saracina. Did he mean to imply that he was her master too? Was that to be her punishment for having invaded his privacy? She gave a little moan of rejection and paused, appalled by the despair in her own voice. Quickly she took a grip on herself. This was the twentieth century, she told herself, and no matter how arrogant he might be, he could not be a complete barbarian. She was allowing her

imagination to play her tricks. Anyway, and her face grew hot at the thought, if that had been what he wanted, she had been at his mercy in that small shadowed room downstairs. Besides, she knew desire when she saw it in a man's eyes and heard it in his voice, and he had displayed only a certain cold anger mixed with contempt. She could not imagine that hard face ever softening under the impetus of tenderness for a woman, she thought wryly, or those brilliant eyes of his glowing with anything other than mockery. And to her amazement she felt herself catch her breath on a little sigh.

- Pulling herself together, she turned away, and stared in consternation as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Was this really Joanna Leighton, this bedraggled-looking creature with the matted hair and swollen eyelids? It made her fears of the past few moments seem ludicrous. No man would want her like this, least of all a haughty Renaissance lord.
- She gave a little groan as she studied herself. She wanted a shower to wash the lingering traces of salt from her body, and restore her hair to its usual gleaming beauty. She owed it to herself to confront her jailer on her own terms, she told herself resolutely. No wonder he had treated her with such contemptuous arrogance, but she would make him see that she was someone to be reckoned with.
- She marched to the door and hammered on it with her fists, listening intently as the furious sound died away. Eventually she heard footsteps approaching and the sound of a key turning in the lock. She took up a position at the foot of the bed, holding herself very straight as the door swung open.
- '*Signorina?*' She recognised the short slim figure in the neat black suit immediately. It was the man who had brought her here in tears. She recalled the impression she had received of kindness and sympathy as he had helped her from his master's study, and she smiled at him, and saw his own expression relax in answer.
- '*Thesignorina* needs something? The room is not comfortable?'
- 'It's a wonderful room, but...' she lowered her voice to sound deliberately conspiratorial, 'a bathroom would be even more wonderful.'
- 'But of course. If *thesignorina* had not been so distressed when I brought her here—please to come this way.' He escorted her out into a long marble-floored corridor and opened a door opposite her room. 'Here,*signorina*.'
- Joanna looked round appraisingly as she stepped inside. The fittings were in a delicate pink marble, and as well as the shower cabinet, there was a small sunken bath. Glass shelves held bath oils and other cosmetics, and a silver towel rail sported a selection of white fluffy towels.
- 'If there is anything else,*signorina* ?'
- 'Only some clothes.' Joanna indicated the black silk robe with a rueful expression.
- '*Thesignorina's* luggage will soon be here. Until then, I regret...' He spread his hands apologetically. 'You see,*signorina* , there are no women here.'
- 'So I have been informed.' Joanna gave him a smiling glance. 'I must say I'm surprised. From what I've seen of your master I wouldn't have thought of him as the celibate type.'

- The friendly expression disappeared and was replaced by the enigmatic mask of the well-trained servant, she saw with a sinking heart. She should not have brought the master of Saracina into the conversation, she realised.
- 'Knock on the door when you are ready, *signorina*, and I will escort you back to your room.' With a slight bow, he vanished and Joanna heard the door lock behind him. She sighed impatiently. Lesson one—no cracks about the *signore*, she thought.
- She found some sachets of a herbal shampoo on one of the shelves and thoroughly washed and rinsed her hair under the shower, towelling it vigorously until it hung in damply curling tendrils around her face. Then she filled the bath with steaming scented water and began to soap herself in a leisurely manner. If it were not for the locked doors and the fact that she was not at liberty to leave the island if she wished, she could be quite happy in these surroundings, she thought drily. Of course her lack of wardrobe would soon cause a serious problem, but... the soap slipped from her hand as something that had been teasing her consciousness thrust itself sharply into the forefront of her mind. That little man had said something about her luggage—that it would soon be here. But how could that be? Surely Tony and the others would not simply hand over her clothes to strangers without question. If so, the note that the *signore* had sent must have been convincing in the extreme, and it annoyed her that she had no idea what he had said in it.
- For a moment, she toyed with the idea that Tony would come himself with her clothes, but had to admit it was a forlorn hope. If he believed, as the *signore* had hinted, that she had deserted the cruise because a more attractive invitation had come her way, he would probably be hurt and angry. And Paul and Mary would only be too glad to believe the worst of her behaviour, she realised ruefully.
- She got out of the bath and wrapped herself in a huge bathsheet. It really seemed as if there was very little to prevent the *signore* from keeping her on Saracina, just as he had said. And she was still at a loss to understand the reason for her enforced stay. Her body dried, she picked up the black silk robe with a sour expression. It was nauseating having to wear a garment of his. She must ask the servant to bring back her bikini and the towelling shift, which must surely be dry by now. She tied the sash of the robe and looked at herself critically. She felt altogether fresher and more able to cope with whatever the evening might bring, as she knocked on the door for the manservant to release her.
- He must have been waiting for her signal, for he appeared almost at once.
- 'The *signorina* would like to rest before dinner?' It was a statement rather than a question as he took her arm and led her gently but firmly back towards her black and silver prison. Joanna hung back a little.
- 'Won't you tell me your name?' she asked, again trying one of her most devastating smiles.
- 'I am Josef, *signorina*.'
- 'Oh.' Joanna digested that for a moment. 'Then you are not Italian, even though your master is.' She could at least establish the nationality of her captor, she thought triumphantly.
- 'You are correct, *signorina*. I am not Italian. Please enjoy your rest.'

- She looked at the closed door, wondering why she should feel so ridiculously snubbed, when God knew that was the least of her troubles.
- She had never felt less like resting in her life. It was beginning to get really dark, and she switched on the pendant lamp which hung in the centre of the room, and the two lamps with silken shades that stood on each side of the bed. As she did so, she saw that another light had come on as well, a light above a painting that she had not really noticed before, hanging on the wall by the door directly opposite the bed.
- Her curiosity aroused, she went over to have a look at it and gasped in amazement. For a moment she thought it was an actual portrait of the man downstairs, then she saw that the man in the painting was wearing the clothes of a bygone century and that the canvas itself had the patina of great age.
- But it could almost have been *thesignore*, his tawny hair hanging smoothly under a little jewelled cap, one hand raised to display the hooded falcon which sat obediently on his wrist. Another prisoner in the dark, she thought ironically.
- The portrait was certainly an original, although she could not recognise the signature that was barely visible on the canvas. There were other words too, dim against the dark background, and with a sudden excitement she realised they could well be the name of the sitter, which was often included in the portraits of notables in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She was hazy about historical costume, but it seemed to her that the velvet doublet opening over a snowy shirt probably belonged more to the earlier period, and she fetched the stool from the dressing chest and stood on it to get a better look.
- Even the eyes were the same, she realised, oddly disquieted. Almost topaz in colour, they stared enigmatically down at her as if mocking her attempt to discover the identity of her jailer. It must be her imagination that the firm lips even seemed to quirk a little as she peered more closely. To her disappointment, the words were too old and indistinct for her to decipher, and she climbed down feeling as if she had merely encountered yet another brick wall.
- With a sigh she wandered restlessly to the window and stared out through the tracery of wrought iron. She gripped part of the grille and tried to shake it, but it was immovable as a rock and she struck at it, aware even as she did so of the complete futility of the gesture.
- It occurred to her for the first time that she was hungry and that the chicken rolls she had eaten on the beach had been a long time ago. That was why she felt so depressed, she told herself resolutely. Josef had mentioned dinner, so it was obviously no part of his master's plan to starve her. Besides, this bedroom was nothing like the popular conception of an *oubliette*, she decided, forcing a wry grin at her too-vivid imagination.
- But there were so many questions still to be answered that it was small wonder that she was tending to overreact. She looked back over the happenings of the last few hours with a kind of dazed amazement. She had been soaked, kidnapped, threatened and frightened to the edge of panic and beyond. She shuddered again as she remembered her arrival at the *palazzo* and that warning growl from the animal she could not see. What was that phrase she had once read—'the terror that walks about in darkness'? With a shiver, she felt she understood what that meant now.
- So it seemed the lion did exist, after all, but surely it must be a tame one, judging by the unfussed reaction from her guards. And yet was any wild animal ever really tamed? she thought, and



wondered why the cold, proud face of the master of Saracina should be suddenly so vivid in her mind.

- She walked back across the room to the bed, and looked down at it restlessly. How long could one go without sleep? she asked herself, because she was sure she would be too disturbed ever to relax in this room. And when she did lie in this bed, would she be alone? She bit her lip, as a strange quiver ran through her body at the thought.
- She turned and stared at the portrait again. The likeness was quite incredible, even down to the same blatant sensual attraction, she thought bitterly. Had that unknown noble of long ago been as aware of his own sexual power as the man downstairs undoubtedly was? She thought it only too likely.
- She was so immersed in her own thoughts that she did not notice the noise straight away, and when she did, she did not place it immediately. Instinctively she moved closer to the window and stared out through the grille, gazing up in astonishment at the helicopter coming in above the roof of the *palazzo*. It was so low that she could almost see the faces of the men sitting in it, and incredulously she thought, 'It's going to land.'
- This was a new development, and no mistake. People who came by sea were forced away with guns, or arrested, yet others apparently could fly in and out as they wished. And it meant too that there was an alternative means of leaving the island. Joanna found she was weighing up the chances of being able to stow away on board a helicopter, and allowed herself a wry laugh. First, she had to get out of this room, and heaven only knew how she was to find her way out of the *palazzo*, let alone discover the whereabouts of the landing strip. But nevertheless she felt the first stirrings of hope at this evidence that Saracina did have some contact with the outside world, a contact that in some not yet conceivable way she might be able to turn to her advantage.
- She strained her ears, but she could not hear the sound of the helicopter's engine, which could mean that it had already landed, perhaps even in the *palazzo* grounds themselves.
- She swung round with a start as the key turned in the lock and Josef entered carrying a tray which held a decanter of sherry and two glasses.
- 'The *signore* has asked me to tell you that he will do himself the honour to dine with you this evening, *signorina*,' he announced, setting the tray down on a small antique table.
- 'Well,' Joanna shrugged, 'I suppose I'm in no position to refuse, so you had better tell him that I too shall be honoured. That is if he feels he can leave his other guests.'
- 'Other guests, *signorina*?' Was that a wary look she detected in Josef's dark eyes?
- 'Why, yes. The two men who just flew in by helicopter. Aren't they expected, or have they merely been locked in some other part of this jail?' Joanna made her voice as innocent as possible.
- Josef bit his lip, obviously ill at ease. 'You are mistaken, *signorina*,' he said at last. 'No helicopter has landed on Saracina. And there are no guests at the *palazzo* other than yourself.'
- Joanna gave him her sweetest smile. 'Anything you say, Josef,' she said lightly, but her mind was working overtime. So their arrival was meant to be a secret, she thought. There's something going



on in this place. Something that Lorenzo the Magnificent downstairs doesn't want anyone from outside to know about. Now what could *themagnifico* be trying to hide?

- It could be worth her while trying to find out, she decided with a private smile, ignoring that annoying inner voice that kept insisting that anyone who went to such lengths to guard his privacy and the secrets it contained as the master of Saracina probably had excellent reasons for doing so, and would deal quite ruthlessly with anyone who tried to meddle in his concerns.
- As soon as Josef had departed, Joanna walked towards the dressing chest and surveyed herself critically in the mirror. Her eyes were over-large in her small pointed face, but the effect was not unattractive. It was a pity she could not change, but the expensive silk of the robe made her golden tan glow in contrast. She picked up the flask of scent and laid the crystal stopper against the pulses in her wrists and throat, before drawing a delicate line of fragrance between her breasts. She hesitated over the cosmetics, then contented herself with simply adding a soft coppery sheen to her lips.
- Her eyes danced as she regarded herself for a moment, then she walked over to the tray and poured herself a glass of the pale dry sherry.
- She turned to the portrait on the wall and lifted her glass in a smiling toast.
- 'Now, my noble lord. Let's find out if you are human after all,' she whispered under her breath.

## • CHAPTER FOUR



- 'I'm glad to see your recent ordeal has not completely destroyed your spirit, *signorina* .'
- Joanna swung round, her face flaming as if she had spoken aloud. How long had he been standing in the doorway? she wondered almost hysterically. That cool, arrogant voice had been the sole advertisement of his presence.
- He came forward into the room, moving noiselessly. He had changed his clothes since their earlier encounter, and he too was wearing black—slightly flared velvet pants and a matching tunic top, the neck severely slashed to reveal his brown chest. It was an outfit that Joanna might have found slightly effeminate on anyone else, but on this man it merely underlined his aura of totally virile masculinity.
- He saw her looking at him, and smiled a little.
- 'I felt it would place you at an unfair disadvantage if I dressed for dinner,' he drawled, and again Joanna experienced that curious tingle across her nerve-endings at his awareness of her near-nakedness. She seethed inwardly at his mocking implication that a minor matter of dress was the only point at issue between them. He had her at a total disadvantage already, and he knew it only too well. 'Oh, let me get the better of him—just once!' she thought furiously.
- He walked to the table which held the decanter and poured himself some sherry.

- 'I hope this short period of solitary confinement hasn't robbed you of speech,' he remarked. 'You had enough to say for yourself when we met earlier, and I had anticipated an entertaining evening.'
- Joanna subdued a schoolgirlish impulse to poke her tongue at him, forcing herself to smile politely instead.
- 'I'm sorry if you find me a bore,' she said with a slight shrug. 'It's just that I'm rather at a loss for words. I'm not used to entertaining a complete stranger in quite such intimate surroundings.'
- 'An admirably demure reply, but totally out of character, I suspect. Why don't you damn my eyes and tell me to get the hell out of your bedroom, if that's what you want to say?'
- 'Would it make any difference if I did?' -Try it and see.' He took another sip from his glass, his eyes glinting at her from under their heavy lids.
- It was certainly a temptation, Joanna thought with annoyance, and yet if he went she stood no chance at all of persuading him to allow her some freedom, or of discovering any hint of what was going on at the *palazzo*, and though she realised it was a pretty forlorn hope, she could not allow it to slip through her fingers.
- She allowed herself the slightest possible pout. 'Why should you be so sure I want you to go?'
- 'Because I'm a kidnapper and a forger,' he returned calmly. 'And because you are unsure that when dinner is over I shall simply kiss your hand and depart. After all, with so many sins to my account already, what's a seduction more or less—and the room was planned for it, as you've no doubt noticed.'
- Joanna cursed the betraying colour which had crept into her face again. 'You're quite wrong...' she began, but he interrupted with an impatient snort.
- 'Don't lie to me, *bella mia*. I've already told you that it's a mistake. You've had several solitary hours to wonder in that woman's mind of yours just what fate I'm planning for you, and that bed will have figured largely in your calculations.' He laughed sardonically as her flush deepened. 'You see, you can't fool me, *cara*. Well, I won't spoil your appetite for dinner by leaving you with your fears. You're quite safe. I don't intend to outrage the laws of hospitality any further.'
- 'I'm relieved to hear it,' she managed, her fingers clenched so tightly round the slender stem of her glass that it threatened to snap. Oh, he was so unbearably, impossibly sure of himself, so convinced that he was in control of the situation. It would be so satisfying to see that control slip, and know that he was at her mercy for a change.
- She finished the sherry in her glass, her heart beating rapidly and unsteadily under the force of her emotions.
- 'If we're operating under the laws of hospitality, then perhaps you could tell me your name at least.' She held out her glass to be refilled with an assurance she was far from feeling. 'It's hardly fair that you should know so much about me and volunteer nothing in return.'
- 'I am flattered by your interest,' he said, busying himself with the decanter. 'My name is Leo Vargas. You may have heard of me.'

- Joanna knew she was gaping at him, but she could not help herself. Of course she had heard of him. Meeting the financiers and business men, as well as the diplomats who visited her father's home, she could not have avoided hearing of the Vargas Corporation, the twentieth-century development of an ancient banking house that could trace its origins back to fourteenth-century Italy.
- 'Then you're—you're really Prince Vorghese,' she began, but he cut in.
- 'I don't use that name, or the title, *signorina*. It has little relevance to today, I find.'
- 'And yet you live here on Saracina, like a feudal lord.'
- 'Perhaps. The farming is poor here, and the fishing uncertain. I have tried to improve things for my people by setting up small industries which will reduce their dependence on the uncertainties of their traditional livelihoods. Is that so wrong? And if in return I ask their loyalty and obedience, do I ask too much?'
- 'You ask a lot if you expect them to live here without women,' she returned, and saw with a flash of triumph that she had momentarily disconcerted him.
- 'Many of the local women are at present enjoying a well-earned vacation on the mainland at my expense' he said after a pause. 'Their absence is a purely temporary arrangement, I assure you, otherwise I would be faced with a rebellion.'
- 'And the Princess Vorghese?' Joanna asked sweetly. 'Is she also enjoying a well-earned rest elsewhere?'
- 'My mother lives in a villa in Geneva,' he drawled. 'Why don't you ask me if I am married, just as you asked my name? This unnecessary deviousness is merely a bore.'
- She could have kicked him. 'Well—are you?' she asked eventually, maintaining a precarious hold on her sweetness.
- 'No, *bella mia*, but I advise you not to raise any ill-founded hopes. I have no intention of marrying at present.'
- She gave him a honeyed look. 'I was merely curious, Signor Vargas, nothing more. As you know so much about me, you must also know that I am already engaged.'
- 'Ah yes. To the fair-haired young man whose expressed wishes you were so anxious to flout last night in the bar.' His smile was satirical. 'An ideal match, and yet you wear no ring.'
- 'My father will be giving a party for us later in the year. The formal announcement will be made then.'
- 'How oddly cold these English courting rituals are,' he murmured. 'Do they reflect, perhaps, the kind of relationship involved?'
- 'You have no right to ask that,' she said unevenly. 'Tony and I are very much in love.'

- 'So much so that you ignore his wishes in order to spend a day alone on a beach. Don't glare at me, *cara*. How often have your thoughts turned to that fiancé of yours since you have been on Saracina? When you wept earlier, it was for yourself, not because you were separated from him, as I would want my woman to weep for me.'
- 'I cannot imagine any woman being fool enough to weep for you,' she said between her teeth, and he laughed softly.
- 'No? *Bene*. Now sheathe your claws or you will shock poor Josef, who is bringing our dinner.'
- It would have been more dignified to have refused to eat with him, but the sight of the food which Josef pushed into the room on a large trolley table was Joanna's undoing.
- There were cornets of smoked salmon, spilling over with tiny prawns, accompanied by dishes of salad, peppers, onions and olives. The main course was tender fillets of veal cooked in a rich Marsala sauce, with green beans and tiny potatoes, with the sharp exciting tang of lemon sorbets in tall frosted glasses to follow. Finally there was coffee, strong and sweet, accompanied by thick cream, and Joanna accepted a Grand Marnier while Leo Vargas drank brandy.
- She sat back in her chair with a sigh of repletion.
- 'You have an excellent chef.'
- 'I am generally well served,' he said. 'My own people do not regard me as the ogre you seem to think. Although you are better off in my hands than you would have been with some of my ancestors,' he added rather drily.
- Joanna's eyes went instinctively to the portrait on the wall and he gave a faint nod.
- 'Yes, you are right, *signorina*. In an age of cruelty and violence the first Leo Vorghese made his name a byword. Saracina was part of the dowry brought to him by the unfortunate girl he married, and he built the first *palazzo* here.'
- 'If he was so notorious, I'm surprised he chose somewhere so quiet and so far away from the Italian mainland,' Joanna said, pushing her table napkin to one side.
- His lips twisted slightly. 'The choice was not wholly his, *cara*. He had offended an influential cardinal—by enticing away the affections of his mistress—and was forced to leave Italy while he could. So Saracina became his stronghold, and he defended it against all comers, including the Barbary pirates and some marauding Turks, so the people had reason to be grateful to him in some ways.'
- 'Was he really so terrible?' Joanna stared up at the portrait, lost in the strange remote attraction of the dead Prince's face.
- 'I believe he was. It is said it was better to die than to be his enemy and his prisoner. He used to fly his favourite hawk—the one you see on his wrist—at the eyes of his captives.'
- 'Vile!' Joanna shuddered.
- He nodded sombrely. 'He was well named the Lion of Saracina.'

- Joanna put down her glass with a jerk that spilled some of the liqueur it contained on to the white damask cloth.
- 'What did you say?' she asked shakily.
- 'Merely that he was well named...!' he broke off, staring at her, and a gleam of amusement appeared in his tawny eyes. He went on lazily, 'It is a name that has persisted down the years among the males in his family. Most of the Vorghese men are dark, but every so often another Leo is born with that particular colouring and the tradition goes on.'
- 'And that—that's what they call you?'
- 'Not to my face.'
- 'But I thought—then what was...?'
- 'What are you talking about?'
- 'When I arrived here,' she said tightly, 'with your thug's jacket over my head, there was an animal— growling at me. I was terrified. They'd mentioned a lion —last night in Calista and again here on the beach. I thought it was real—a real lion.'
- He threw back his head and laughed. Don't glare at me like that, *bella mia* . You will ruin your digestion. I will show you your lion.'
- He got up from his chair and walked to the window. He stood staring through the grille for a moment and gave a long, low whistle. Joanna waited for a nerve-jangling moment, uncertain what to expect, then, in reply, came a frenzied barking.
- 'Oh.' Joanna was conscious of a strong sense of anticlimax. 'A dog. Can I see him?' She got up. Is he fierce?'
- 'Yes.' Leo Vargas returned to the table and sat down, picking up his brandy glass. 'And no respecter of beautiful women, although he probably growled at you earlier because you were wearing a jacket over your head. He is quite a conventional animal. But I do not advise you to tangle with him—or any of his companions.'
- 'And what is his function?' Joanna asked.
- 'He is a guard dog. He patrols the grounds of the *palazzo* at night. But I say again, *cara* , you would do well not to seek his company. I would not want you to faint again.'
- 'I don't think that's very likely,' she said coolly. 'I was—overwrought earlier at our first encounter. But I'm quite used to dogs, and I certainly don't blame him simply for doing his duty.'
- 'Do you always forgive so easily?' Leo Vargas asked. He was lying back in his chair, toying with his brandy glass.
- 'It depends what the offence has been.' Her pulses were jumping suddenly. She stole a look at him, but his eyes were hooded, enigmatic. She was waiting for him to speak again, but the silence

between them lengthened.

- 'When are you going to let me go?'
- No pleading. Almost a casual tone. She was proud of that, and wondered how much she owed to the Dutch courage of the wine at dinner.
- 'You have a saying, don't you? This year, next year, some time—or never.'
- 'But don't you see'—she tried to keep her voice reasonable—'the longer you keep me here, the worse it will be for you when you do release me. You may be an important man in your own world, but I am a British subject and we do still have rights. And kidnapping is a terribly serious crime, especially in Italy.'
- 'But we are not in Italy,' he said almost idly. 'We are on Saracina, which belongs to me, and where I make the laws. You trespassed, and now you are being punished, because that is my law.'
- 'I think you're mad,' she said helplessly.
- 'Sometimes I think so too.' He drained the remainder of his brandy and got up, his movements as lithe and easy as those of the animal for which he had been named. Joanna rose too.
- 'You told me not to lie to you,' she said, 'but I think you're lying to me. You talk about punishment. I don't think it's anything of the sort. I think there's something going on here on this island that you don't want the outside world to know about and that's why you have your armed guards and your gunboats. It's not to safeguard your privacy. It's to keep some secret, and I can only think it must be something pretty discreditable if it warrants all this performance.'
- 'Go on.' He was standing by the door, his hands resting lightly on his hips, his face in shadow so she could not read his expression, but she could hear the edge in his voice and knew she had struck somewhere near the truth.
- 'Keep your secret for as long as you can,' she said. 'One day I shall leave this place, because sooner or later someone—Tony or my father—will come to fetch me, and I shall tell them everything I know. You must be subject to some kind of authority, somewhere, and they will know how to deal with you.'
- 'Have you anything more to say, before I bid you goodnight?'
- 'Yes,' she said, and at last her voice trembled a little. 'You asked me just now if I forgave easily. But I'll tell you now, Leo Vargas or Vorghese or whatever you choose to call yourself, I shall never forgive you for what you've made me suffer on this island. If it takes me all my life, I'll make you sorry for what you've done to me. And every day you keep me here will be one more day to hate you.'
- He laughed softly, jeeringly, and somehow it frightened her more than the anger she was half expecting.
- 'Hate me, then, *mia* .' He came away from the door in a swift lunge, and two long strides brought him to her. 'But hate me for a reason, not because I have hurt your pride a little.'

- She wanted to move, to back away, but the chair was behind her and she stumbled even as his arms went round her body, drawing her against him. For a moment her hands instinctively clung to his shoulders as she steadied herself and she could feel his hard muscles straining against the soft velvet tunic.
- His eyes were golden and glowing, as if lit by some inner angry fire. Lion's eyes, she thought wildly. And he's strong and dangerous and cruel. King of his own private jungle. And then as his mouth came down on hers, all thought stopped and sensation, pure and naked, took its place.
- All thoughts of resistance melted as he gathered her even closer, his lips parting hers with a ruthless mastery that she had never dreamed could exist. She was helpless against his strength, helpless to deny him the sweet flood of response his kiss was arousing in spite of herself.
- He raised his head, his own breathing unsteady, and gazed down at her, her eyes wide and enormous in her small face. Then with a sound between a sigh and a groan, he bent to her again. Their mouths clung, parted, dissolved. It was as if they drank from each other. His tongue trailed a delicate fire around her eager lips, then found the small hollows of her ears. She heard herself moan as her mouth sought his again, like a flower turning to the sun. His hand caressed the soft mound of her breast through the concealing silk, then found the sash of her robe and pulled it loose. The breath sighed from her throat in one long clamour of yearning.
- Then from the corridor came a slight sound. Leo Vargas lifted his head, listening. Joanna stared at him for a moment, feeling utterly bereft, then she heard them too, the quiet footsteps approaching along the passage.
- It was Josef coming to clear the table, she thought dazedly. He could have found them here, like this. Icy with sudden shame, she dragged the folds of black silk around her body, tightening the sash with shaking hands.
- '*Cara*.' He sounded almost amused, she thought furiously. 'Josef is a perfect servant. He would never intrude.' He reached for her again. 'Let me send him away,' he whispered.
- She slapped him as hard as she could across the face. For a moment she waited, appalled, afraid that he was going to retaliate as his grip tightened cruelly on her slender arm. He had gone pale, she saw, and the angry mark her blow had left stood out on his cheek. Then quite suddenly she was free, standing alone on legs that threatened to collapse under her.
- He looked back at her from the doorway. 'You hate well, *mia*,' he said coolly, and left her.
- It was almost dawn before Joanna drifted into a restless sleep. She had lain awake for hours, mentally and emotionally exhausted by the most prolonged bout of self-examination she had ever conducted. And the answers she had come up with had ranged from the unsatisfactory to the totally unacceptable.
- There was simply no gainsaying the fact that she had allowed a man who was her enemy, keeping her prisoner in his house for his own dark purposes, to make passionate love to her. In fact, she had not merely allowed him to do so, but had responded with every fibre of her being to him. If Josef's imminent arrival had not shocked her back to sanity, she knew unquestioningly that there would only have been one end to the episode, and she shivered, pressing her burning face



almost convulsively into the cool linen of the lace-edged pillows.

- So much for her fighting words of hatred and revenge, she thought bitterly. Leo Vargas had shown her just how vulnerable she was as a woman. Another page for his dossier, and her spirit writhed in rebellion at the thought.
- When he had gone, she had looked at herself in the mirror, horrified at the stranger who stared back at her, with the huge, drowsy eyes and the mouth swollen and blurred by passion. She had wiped a swift, rejecting hand across that mouth, but it had done nothing to obscure the softness that her first real encounter with sensuality had brought to her features.
- She had remained by the window, staring rigidly into the darkness while Josef, tactfully silent, busied himself with the clearing away.
- At last she spoke, her back still turned, terrified of what he might read in her face. 'Josef, do I have to have that portrait hanging in this room while I am here?'
- 'But it has always hung here, *signorina*,' Josef said, in obvious surprise. 'You do not care for it? You are not like the other ladies who have occupied this room. They think the Lion Prince is *molto bello*.'
- 'No,' she said tightly, 'I am not like the others. Were they locked in too?'
- There was a brief, unhappy silence, then Josef said diffidently, 'If the *signorina* could only understand... if it were possible to explain...'
- 'So you're in it too,' she said, and laughed almost wildly. 'What has that *signore* done, Josef—made off with the millions from the Vorghese bank? Is that the reason for the guards—that he expects an armed landing to get them back?'
- There was a splintering crash from behind her, and she turned to see Josef on his knees picking up the remnants of one of the crystal wine goblets they had used at dinner.
- Her mouth went suddenly dry. Josef was too impeccable a servant to behave with such clumsiness without cause. Had her shot in the dark actually hit the target? Leo Vargas with his icy patrician air, and volcanic emotions—a thief?
- She shook her head disbelievingly. And yet it all fitted, she thought, trying to assemble her thoughts rationally. When she had accused him of concealing something discreditable, he had made no outraged denials. Perhaps he was merely relieved she had not carried the accusation a step further and called him a criminal to his face.
- It also explained, gallingly, a possible motive for his lovemaking, she realised. He probably thought she would be less likely to inform on him as his mistress, or had he merely hoped that his expertise in the art of seduction would have swept every other consideration from her mind? Had he visualised her as blind and tamed to obedience as the hooded falcon who sat in perpetual thrall on the wrist of the first Vorghese Lion?
- She said in a stifled voice, 'Please see if you can take that portrait away, Josef. I don't think I can bear it in the room with me.'

- 'I will tell the *signore* how you feel about it, *signorina*, but I can promise nothing.' Josef sounded distracted, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. He bade her a rather stilted goodnight and left, and she heard the sound of the trolley disappearing down the corridor. But he had not been too distracted to forget to lock the door behind him, she thought bleakly.
- She switched off the lights, leaving only one of the shaded bedside lamps burning. She sat down in front of the dressing chest and picked up the hairbrush, to give her hair its routine nightly grooming. As she did so, she remembered what Josef had said about the 'other ladies' who had occupied this room, and she found herself unwillingly wondering who they had been. Perhaps they too had sat at this dressing table, brushing their hair in the lamplight, smiling a little as their eyes met in the mirror the bold, tawny gaze of the golden-skinned man who lounged on the wide bed in the shadows behind them. A little sob rose in her throat at the picture she had deliberately created and she was shocked at its power to wound her.
- Perhaps if she could only get rid of that damned portrait, that other and infinitely more disturbing presence would also stop plaguing her, she thought savagely, pressing the soft swell of her palm against her teeth.
- Guilt rose up in her as Tony's face swam into her mind. Less than two hours before, she had told Leo Vargas how much she loved Tony. Now she was forced to acknowledge how lukewarm her feelings for him had been in the light of the evening's revelations about her own desires. And if she was honest with herself, she had already suspected that their relationship was not completely wholehearted as far as she was concerned. It could have been doubts about her feelings that had influenced her in deciding to pursue a modelling career after all, she thought, remembering as if it was a thousand years ago her idyllic afternoon on the beach, and the decisions she had reached there.
- It was not a particularly pleasant reflection to wonder if she had chosen Tony simply because he was suitable, and she knew he would make no demands on her that she could not handle. She had found little difficulty in fending off his attempts to bring their lovemaking to a more intimate level, she recalled. Yet she was not naive enough to believe that the simple placing of a wedding ring on her finger was suddenly going to transform their relationship to the heights of ardour. She realised now that if she married Tony, she would be doing them both an injustice. He was a warm loving person, and deserved more than the half-hearted giving of herself he would have got from her, she thought soberly.
- If she had been wavering before, she was now certain that everything had to end between them. It was odd to think how little effect Tony's caresses had ever engendered and then to remember that wild burning moment when she had waited, poised it seemed between heaven and hell, for Leo's hands to touch her body.
- He would never again find her so weak or so willing, she vowed fiercely as a sweet stab of longing went through her. This torment of unfulfilled desire would be her punishment for having yielded herself so easily to a stranger who had shown her neither tenderness and consideration, nor respect. But from now on her mind would be shut to him.
- But her dreams were not so responsive to her will, and it seemed when she opened reluctant eyes to the morning sun streaming in through the delicate iron lattice-work at the windows that she was still in some nightmare jungle where giant cats pursued her endlessly as their prey under the sardonic gaze of a tawny-haired man, his hunting hawk docile on his wrist.

- She sat up with a heavy sigh, conscious that her head ached, and then she saw something at the foot of her bed which brought her attention sharply into focus. Three pigskin suitcases with gold initials were stacked neatly on the mosaic floor. It was her luggage from the *Luana*. Another victory to the enemy, she thought morosely, but perhaps it would be his last, and she had to admit it would be good to have her own clothes again, and to know she did not have to spend any more hours in that black silk dressing gown. She pushed its crumpled folds contemptuously aside with her foot as she slid out of bed.
- Her nightwear and undies were in the top case, and also included was a note—from Mary, Joanna realised as she snatched it up and unfolded it.
- 'Dear Joanna,' it read, 'You did not say how long you would be staying on Saracina, so I am sending all your clothes to be on the safe side. I don't think we shall be here much longer anyway, as Tony is too upset by the way you've behaved to want to go on with the cruise to Livorno, and I can't say I blame him. We shall visit Corsica as planned, and then call it a day. I suppose we shall see you in London some time when you can tear yourself away from your wealthy Italian friends. You could have told us Prince Vorghese was an old friend of your father, instead of just creeping off like that, but I suppose you have your reasons. Mary.'
- Old friend of her father indeed! Joanna screwed the note into a ball and hurled it to the floor. Oh, the damnable cleverness of the man, even down to the use of his discarded title to add that final touch of ultra-respectability.
- So now they were all on Corsica, thinking the worst of her, and she could expect no help from that quarter. Joanna sighed. She would have to rely solely on her own wits from now on, and they had not served her particularly well so far, she thought sourly.
- She pulled out her favourite broderie anglaise wrap and put it on, just as a discreet knock sounded at the door. She called 'Come in', and then paused, her heart thumping, but it was only Josef who appeared in the doorway.
- 'Thesignorina wishes to use the bathroom before her breakfast?'
- 'She certainly does.' Joanna swept up a handful of underwear and snapped the locks on the next case, pulling out a sleeveless full-skirted dress in navy cotton with a trim white edging round the low scooped neck and armholes.
- Her spirits had risen mercurially by the time she had showered and dressed, and she returned to her room in time to see that Josef had set a table and a chair by the window for her and was putting out a tall jug of fruit juice and a silver coffee pot on a small electric heater. There was grilled fish, tasting magically of the sea, and freshly baked rolls to eat with chilled curls of butter.
- 'Magnificent,' she told Josef when he reappeared at the end of the meal, and he gave her a delighted smile.
- 'I have told thesignore of thesignorina's request that the portrait of his ancestor should be removed from her room,' he said with a little cough. 'Thesignore replied that if a finger was laid on the portrait then the ghost of the Lion of Saracina would return to haunt thesignorina. But I think he was joking,' he added, frowning a little. 'No one has ever spoken of a ghost at the palazzo'

- Joking I Joanna's nails curled into her palm. She smiled at Josef. 'You may tell *thesignore* that it is no longer important,' she said. 'Tell him in fact that I am no longer the fool I was last night.'
- Josef stared at her, distressed. 'But I am sure *thesignore* has never regarded you as a fool, *signorina*,' he protested.
- 'No?' Joanna asked satirically. 'And what's my programme for today now that the condemned woman has eaten her hearty breakfast? Are there any mailbags I can stitch, or shall I simply measure my room in paces from wall to wall?'
- '*Che còsa?*' Josef was clearly puzzled, and Joanna sighed impatiently.
- 'I'm sorry, Josef. It isn't your fault,' she said. 'It's just that I don't think I can face being shut up like this for very much longer.'
- 'But that is not *thesignore's* intention,' Josef assured her. 'He means *thesignorina* to move freely around *thepalazzo* !'
- 'And the grounds?' Joanna spoke casually, but she was inwardly alert. She might soon have an opportunity to search around for the landing strip.
- Josef shrugged rather vaguely. 'It is possible—with an escort.' He did not meet Joanna's eyes. 'The grounds are large. *Thesignorina* might lose herself,' he explained.
- 'Oh, really?' Joanna returned, too pleasantly. 'But you can assure *thesignore* that my bump of direction is really very good.'
- Josef looked uncomfortable. 'Nevertheless...'
- Was it just the landing strip she wasn't supposed to find, Joanna wondered, or might she stumble across something else?'
- Aloud, she said quickly, 'I'm teasing you, Josef. I don't mind how many escorts I have just as long as I can get out of this room sometimes.'
- 'I will tell *thesignore* .' Josef gave her a little bow and departed.
- When he had gone, Joanna could not resist performing one quick, joyous pirouette. She would not spoil her chances by attempting to rush into headlong flight. She would take her time and lay her plans properly. Apart from finding an escape route, she still had to recover her passport and other belongings from Leo Vargas' study, and it would all take time.
- She smiled to herself. Time was something she seemed to have plenty of, and if there was a way off this island then she would find it. And if at the same time she could bring down the Lion of Saracina, she would do so.
- If Leo Vargas intended to allow her some freedom, he was certainly in no hurry to do so, Joanna thought as another hour dragged by. She had filled in the time by unpacking her clothes and putting them away in the large carved wardrobe and matching chest of drawers, but now she was bored with that task accomplished, and becoming restive.

- She had begun to think that he was playing a cat and mouse game with her, when to her relief she heard footsteps, and Josef appeared again.
- 'Will the *signorina* accompany me downstairs to the *salotto* ?'
- Joanna nodded slowly. She had hoped to avoid another encounter with the master of Saracina until the devastating events of the previous night had faded a little in her memory, but she supposed a meeting was inevitable and had to be faced.
- As they left her room and started along the corridor, she gazed around with interest. She had been too upset when she had been brought here to take much note of her surroundings, but now in the morning sunlight she found the *palazzo* almost breathtaking. The walls had been washed in clear, pale colours that reflected back the light and the corridors were lined with small alcoves, each of which seemed to contain some valuable piece of furniture, statuary or a painting.
- Joanna would have liked to linger and examine some of them more closely, but she was anxious to find out to what extent she was free to wander about, so she matched her own step to Josef's brisk stride and soon they came out on to a broad gallery, bordered by a carved stone balustrade. The gallery led, she saw, the whole length of the *palazzo's* great entrance hall to rooms in other wings of the building, and from its centre point a wide marble staircase gently curved to the ground floor, exquisitely tiled in grey, pink and white.
- The doors leading off the hall were very tall and dark, heavy with carving and embellished with ornate iron handles—in the shape of a lion's head, Joanna saw with a faint curl of her lip. She wondered which was Leo Vargas' study, but the doors were all closed and gave nothing away.
- The main doorway stood open to the morning air as Joanna came downstairs at Josef's side. There was freedom and the sunlight seemed to beckon her, but at the same time she was only too aware that any attempt at flight would probably prove abortive. She would be caught by one of the patrol guards, if not by Josef himself, before she got a hundred yards away.
- '*Signorina*.' Josef had reached one of the tall closed doors and had opened it for her to pass through. She paused, a sudden tension entering her limbs, then with a faint shrug she walked slowly into the room.
- For a moment she hesitated, swiftly assimilating the elegant surroundings—the cream-tiled floor, the walls hung with valuable-looking tapestries and the high, frescoed ceiling. Then her eyes went to the dark figure of the man standing at the far end of the room, looking out of the french windows, his back turned to her.
- In a formal suit, he did not look quite as tall or imposing as he had done last night, she was thinking, when he turned and she found she was studying a complete stranger.
- He was younger than Leo Vargas and much darker.
- But he was attractive too, with a dancing smile that lit up his face when he saw her.
- 'So you are Signorina Leighton. I am charmed to make your acquaintance.' He spoke English with only the faintest of accents, she noticed, as he came over to her, taking her hand and bowing over it with an old-fashioned gallantry that Joanna found rather soothing. 'Permit me to introduce

myself. I am Nick Vargas, Leo's cousin.'

- 'You are staying here too?' Joanna asked.
- He smiled pointedly. 'As from now,*si*.'
- 'Does your autocratic cousin know?' Joanna knew she was being rude, but was unable to resist the temptation.
- 'But of course he knows. I am here only at his express invitation. Normally I would stay with him later in the year, but last night I received his summons, so I flew in early this morning.'
- 'You flew in—by helicopter?'
- '*Si*. I trust I did not waken you.'
- 'Oh, no.' Joanna replied mechanically, her mind working furiously. She wondered if the helicopter which had brought Nick Vargas was still at the landing area, and when it was due to make its return trip to the mainland. She asked, trying to keep her voice casual, 'Are you staying long?'
- 'That depends on you,*signorina*.'
- 'On me?' she stared at him.
- 'I shall stay while you do,*signorina*.'
- 'I see. Your cousin has brought you here to be my keeper, in other words.'
- 'Signorina Leighton,' his voice drowned her in reproach, 'do I look like anyone's keeper?' He gave her another of his disarming smiles. 'Naturally, you would prefer to be with Leo—and who can blame you, but it is impossible just at the moment, as you must know. So he has asked me to act as your companion until all this is over and he can behave as a proper host again.'
- 'Signore Vargas,' Joanna interrupted him forcibly, 'I think you're under a misapprehension. I have absolutely no wish to be with your cousin, now or later. I find him totally objectionable. And I don't know where you have got the idea he is my host. My jailer would be a more appropriate description.'
- 'So,' Nick Vargas gave a slight whistle, 'you are not enjoying your stay at the *palazzo*, *signorina*? You have quarrelled with Leo, perhaps. His temper can be abominable I have experience of it myself and...'
- 'No!' Joanna said almost despairingly. 'You're completely wrong,*signore*. Whatever your cousin may have told you, I am not his guest. I wasn't even acquainted with him until yesterday when his men caught me sunbathing on a beach on the other side of the island. I was bundled up like a—*a* parcel of washing and brought here under guard. I've been here ever since, locked in an upstairs room with bars on the windows and a portrait of some Renaissance sadist to keep me company.'
- 'The Vorghese room?' Nick gave a little grin. 'I can assure you,*signorina*, that room is



generally reserved for Leo's closest acquaintances. I am sure he does not mean for you to remain such bad friends with him. And having seen you, *signorina*, I cannot find it in my heart to blame him.

- 'I suppose you think I should be flattered by your revolting insinuations,' Joanna said icily. 'Well, I'm afraid I find them too high a price to pay, even for companionship and a certain amount of freedom. You can tell your cousin that I prefer my own company, Signore Vargas, and you can go back to wherever you came from—*presto!*'
- She turned away from him sharply, tears pricking at her eyelids.
- '*Signorina.*' His hand was on her arm, and his voice was suddenly very gentle. 'It is more than possible that I have misread the situation entirely, and I ask your pardon. Please don't send me away. We are both obliged to stay here for a time and it seems foolish for us both to be lonely.'
- Joanna was quiet for a moment, then she gave a little sigh. 'It would be stupid,' she agreed. 'I—I accept your apology, *signore*. Perhaps I'm over-sensitive on the subject, but I get very tired of everyone I meet assuming I'm some kind of—gift for the Lion.'
- Nick Vargas' mobile mouth quirked. 'And what brave man dared to call you that, *signorina* ?'
- For a moment Joanna hovered between annoyance and laughter, then laughter won. 'One of the men who captured me,' she admitted. 'I had no idea what he meant, of course, and I was absolutely terrified.'
- 'And when you did find out?'
- 'I was absolutely terrified.'
- They both laughed then, and the atmosphere between them suddenly relaxed.
- 'Now we are friends. I will ring for Josef to bring us some coffee.' Nick walked to the ornate fireplace and pulled a long embroidered cord that hung there. 'We will take it on the terrace, I think, and you shall tell me all about yourself, Joanna—I may call you that? And you shall call me Nick.'
- 'Very well,' Joanna found herself acceding rather weakly as he opened one of the long glass doors and ushered her out on to a wide terrace with a small arbour of bougainvillaea at one end containing a comfortable-looking wickerwork swing seat and a table. There was another group of chairs around a table further along the terrace and Joanna guessed it was often the setting for alfresco meals. She could quite understand why. The air was like wine, and the view from the terrace was magnificent, looking down over a vista of formal gardens to the glitter of the sea beyond.
- 'The grounds of the *palazzo* run right to the edge of the cliff.' Nick told her as they drank their coffee. 'It was built on a tongue of land and the town and the harbourage grew up on the other side in its shadow.'
- 'Mutual protection, I suppose, in the bad old days.' Joanna shaded her eyes against the glare of the sun. It was difficult not to breathe a sigh of utter contentment in such surroundings.

- 'Indeed, yes. The great Lion of Saracina, Leo Vorghese whose portrait hangs in your room, built look-outs on the highest points in this island and a system of little forts around it as security against the pirates. Saracina was overwhelmed a number of times in the centuries after his death, but usually when the Lord of Saracina was absent. The islanders began to say the Lion of Saracina was their protection and that no evil would befall them while he lived here among them.'
- 'And do they feel that now, with your cousin's armed guards standing over them?' Joanna asked tartly.
- Nick looked uncomfortable. 'They accept the necessity.'
- 'As they accept living here without their women at the *signore's* whim?'
- 'Joanna,' Nick laid his hand over hers. There may be things on Saracina that seem strange to you, but do not question them, I beg you. Try to accept...'
- 'Like one of the poor superstitious islanders, I suppose,' Joanna said disdainfully. 'I'm sorry, Nick. I'm not in the least grateful for the protection of the current Lion of Saracina, and when I get away from here, I'll make him wish he'd never been born.'
- Nick surveyed her enigmatically. 'Maybe you will not have to leave here to do that, Joanna.' He laughed suddenly. 'Now what would you like to do after lunch?'
- Joanna thought briefly, then opted for a tour of the *palazzo* and its grounds. She had realised that Nick was obviously in his cousin's confidence to a certain extent and was doubtful whether she would ever be able to obtain his co-operation in any attempt to escape from the island. She felt it was better not to appear to be too eager to get away from the vicinity of the *palazzo*, to begin with at any rate. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that Nick, for all his apparent friendliness and admiration, might be reporting back to Leo Vargas on anything significant she said or did.
- 'I hope he is,' she thought vindictively. 'I hope he repeats everything I've said about him!'
- Nick was grumbling good-humouredly about her plans for the afternoon, insisting that they were too strenuous for the heat of the day.
- 'I will show you the *palazzo*, and then we will lie by the swimming pool and someone will bring us iced drinks,' he declared.
- 'A swimming pool?' Joanna sat up, her plans for escape momentarily forgotten. 'Oh, Nick, how wonderful. Where?'
- Nick pointed. 'At the side of the house where it is most sheltered. It will be pleasant to go there—and perhaps not make any tours at all,' he added on a note of inspiration.
- Joanna gave an exasperated chuckle. 'You're just being lazy. Besides, I really do want to see round the *palazzo*. Just from the glimpse I got this morning some of the art treasures look almost priceless.'
- Nick shrugged. 'You are probably right. But I warn you, Joanna, I am no expert. It is Leo who cares about such things. He knows the history of every picture— every piece of sculpture. You

should ask him to escort you when he has time.'

- 'No.' Joanna's eyes flashed inimically and he stared at her.
- 'It is most odd that you hate him so,' he mused. 'It is not the reaction of most women.'
- 'I wouldn't have thought the reaction of any woman would have been of much importance to him, otherwise why won't he allow them into his marble tower?' Joanna strove to sound casual, but she was aware that her pulses were maddeningly playing strange tricks.
- Nick laughed. 'Now it is you that misreads the situation, Joanna,' he teased her. 'Leo is no recluse. When he needs a woman, one comes to him, believe me.'
- Joanna found to her mortification that she was blushing. She was behaving more like a schoolgirl than a grown woman, she told herself angrily. Leo Vargas had made her more than aware only a few hours earlier that he was not a celibate by nature or inclination, but a man who would have no hesitation in using a woman for his total enjoyment if the opportunity came his way. Pursuing the point with Nick achieved nothing except the confirmation of her own intuitive knowledge, rather like pressing an already aching tooth to make it jump, she thought, and frowned at her own analogy with all its implications of pain.
- Because there was nothing that she could learn about Leo Vargas that could cause her pain, she told herself vehemently. Nothing!

## • CHAPTER FIVE



- The tour of the *palazzo* was both instructive and tiring. Joanna lost count of the rooms and corridors she saw, all of which seemed to twist and turn eventually back on to that central gallery. The place was an art thieves' paradise, she thought dazedly as names like Canaletto and Tintoretto came almost monotonously off Nick's tongue as he led her round. Perhaps Leo Vargas knew what he was doing with his armed guards and strict security after all.
- Many of the rooms were locked and their furniture shrouded under dust sheets. Nick and Joanna gained access to them by means of a huge bunch of keys which Nick carried in his hand, complaining that they would ruin the line of his suit if he put them in his pocket. Joanna smothered a smile at this little piece of vanity. Nick, while undoubtedly attractive, was far less of an unknown quantity than his enigmatic cousin, she decided. He was obviously on his best behaviour, otherwise she guessed that the admiration that she read in his eyes would have been expressed rather more openly.
- Joanna was relieved that he was remaining at a distance. She wanted no more emotional entanglements, even the light-hearted flirtation that a relationship with Nick would consist of, and which she would have quite enjoyed at one time. But she realised with a new maturity that every relationship carried its own risks and that she would do well to hold herself aloof until her bruised and disturbed emotions regained their equilibrium.
- 'Leo's private suite is along here,' Nick was saying. 'Do you want to see it?'

- 'No,' she said hastily. She had not caught so much as a glimpse of Leo Vargas all day, and she cringed at the thought of encountering him in his private rooms as part of a sightseeing tour. She could still remember his chilly, 'I am not a peepshow, *signorina* .'
- 'Well, perhaps you are right,' Nick said cheerfully. 'I think we have seen everything now, don't you? I could do with a drink.'
- 'These passages are like a maze,' Joanna said, frowning. 'But I'm almost sure we haven't been down that one. Look, that opening with the curtain over it. I don't remember that at all.'
- 'Oh, you can't want to see any more,' Nick protested. 'Let's get changed and go and sit by the pool. I'm tired.'
- 'Just down here,' Joanna said inexorably. 'Who knows —there might be a Botticelli, or some Michelangelo frescoes you've forgotten about.'
- Nick groaned. 'No chance. Anything like that would have been destroyed centuries ago when the original *palazzo* was knocked to the ground during some invasion. This is the third or maybe even the fourth building, and it has survived longer than any. It even lived undamaged through the last war.'
- 'Were all these pictures and treasures here then?'
- Nick shook his head. 'It was after the war that Leo's father decided to transfer the family's art collection to Saracina. Before then it had been scattered and hidden to avoid capture by the Germans. The *palazzo* had been neglected for many years before that, but Uncle Marco started restoration work. He put in the bathrooms and began the modernisation of the kitchen quarters. It was he who brought electricity to the island' too. My own father thought he was mad, but Uncle Marco said as he had bred another Lion of Saracina for the Vorghese family, it was up to him to restore his birthright.'
- 'Another Lion?' Joanna raised her eyebrows questioningly.
- 'Leo was the first in many generations to be born with the Lion's colouring,' Nick explained. 'Many thought that the tawny-haired strain in our family had died out altogether.'
- Joanna resisted the impulse to utter some childish expression of regret that it hadn't, and changed the subject instead.
- 'Is there nothing left of the original building?' she asked.
- Nick shrugged. 'I believe the same foundations were used each time—oh, and the dungeons. They still exist, although they are used as wine cellars these days, of course.'
- 'I'm surprised your cousin didn't lock me there,' she said coolly, and he laughed.
- 'Hardly, *cara* . Leo probably thought you would have too disturbing an influence on his wine.'
- Their passage was suddenly blocked by a stout wooden door. Nick searched through his bunch of keys, muttering.

- 'That's strange,' he said after a while. 'The key for this door does not seem to be here. We will have to go back.'
- 'Oh,' Joanna was disappointed. 'Can't you see if one of the others will fit?'
- Nick fitted one key after another into the ornate lock without success. 'You see, Joanna. It is useless. We will have to go back.'
- 'Yes, I see,' Joanna said slowly. 'Doesn't it strike you as strange, Nick? All the other keys were there, but this one is missing.'
- She was almost sure that something came and went in Nick's eyes, but his smiling reply was as easy as ever.
- 'You must forgive us, *cara*. Even the best regulated households occasionally mislay things, you know. I will have to tell Leo the key is missing.'
- 'Oh, I shouldn't bother,' Joanna told him coldly. 'I think he knows already, don't you?'
- She turned and stalked back up the corridor, her heart hammering. Whatever secret the *palazzo* contained, she was almost certain the answer lay behind that locked door.
- It was also evident that Nick was aware of what was going on, so it would be useless to rely on him for any kind of help. She could have groaned aloud. It would be much easier, she thought, to forget all about flight and locked doors and secrets, and merely relax and enjoy the sunshine in Nick's company. But that, no doubt, was what she was intended to think. The whole tour of the *palazzo* might have been planned by Leo Vargas to prove to her that she could only learn as much as he chose in his house.
- She bit her lip angrily. It was clear that she would get nowhere by open investigation, particularly with Nick in close attendance. Maybe the answer was to do as Leo Vargas hoped and appear to give up. Whether he would believe in her new docility was another matter, but it was worth trying at least.
- She turned smiling as Nick caught up with her.
- 'What now, *cara*?' he inquired plaintively. 'More sightseeing?'
- She slipped her arm through his. 'Now show me the swimming pool,' she invited.
- The cool blue water felt glorious against her overheated body. She pushed herself away from the edge in a backward somersault that took her skimming down almost to the pool bottom before jack-knifing back to the surface again, to swim a length in her strong easy crawl. Nick, comfortably ensconced on a cushioned lounge at the poolside, applauded languidly.
- 'You swim well, Joanna,' he called. 'We must have a race some time.'
- 'I'd beat you,' Joanna laughed at him. 'Honestly, Nick, do you never take any exercise?'
- 'I play squash a little,' he admitted. 'I see little point, *cara*, in exercising and so developing

muscles which I can only use to do more exercises.'

- She pulled herself out of the water and sat on the edge, dangling her legs in the water and looking at the glitter of the sun on the rippled surface with half-closed eyes. The air was heavy with scent from the formal gardens nearby, and heavy clumps of blossom in purple, white and pink grew over the high stone walls which gave the pool area its privacy. It was the nearest thing she had been to absolute contentment since she had gone to sleep on that little beach over a week before.
- These hours at the poolside had become very much part of the pattern of her day since Nick's arrival on the island. Her prison walls had now extended to include not only the *palazzo*, but also most of its grounds, but Nick made an excellent warder, she thought wryly, and her freedom was still strictly limited.
- She knew no more now than she had done when she first arrived. Helicopters still came and went at odd hours of the day or night, but she had not been able to discover whom they carried or even where they landed. The *palazzo's* hidden life went on undisturbed, in spite of her presence, she thought, while she was in grave danger of abandoning herself to the life of a lotus-eater,,
- Usually she breakfasted in her room, before joining Nick on the terrace. Then they swam together, or lay in the sun beside the pool and talked or walked in the enormous grounds. She had discovered an immaculately marked tennis court, but so far she had been unable to persuade Nick to give her a game.
- Sometimes she dined downstairs with the cousins, but she avoided this situation whenever possible. There were times when Nick's amusing companionship made her forget that she was really under his close supervision, and she could imagine instead that she was simply a guest at the *palazzo*. But one ironic glance from Leo Vargas was all that it took to remind her of her real position in the household.
- She had been very loth to meet him again after what had happened in her room, but the next encounter was accompanied by less embarrassment than she had feared, thanks largely to Nick's presence. It was almost impossible to feel awkward in the face of Nick's exuberant charm, and she had to admit that Leo Vargas himself had given no hint that anything but the merest courtesy a host would extend to any guest had passed between them.
- He was civil but aloof, so much so that Joanna began to wonder if she had dreamed the moments she had spent in his arms. But at the same time, her body's involuntary reaction to his presence told her clearly that what had passed between them had been far from imaginary. It was oddly disconcerting to find that he could apparently shrug off her appeal to him as a woman with such ease. And she had appealed to him. She knew enough of men to know that his desire for her had been quite genuine. She wondered sometimes if their relationship had been continued to the final consummation that night whether he would have treated her afterwards in exactly the same way, showing her quite clearly that whatever his schemes were, she could have no in them.
- Once and only once had she felt that her first night on the island held any place in his memory. One evening after dinner, Nick had suggested some music from the impressive array of hi-fi equipment housed in the elegant cabinets along one wall of the *salotto*. He had played some Beethoven and Brahms, following this up with works by some of the more modern Russian composers like Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Joanna had only had a nodding acquaintance with



their music before and she found it a revelation, containing a beauty and emotional appeal that made her ache inwardly. She sat, her feet tucked under her, her whole being absorbed in the wild and lonely music, and as the last chords died away she came back to earth with a start to find Leo Vargas' eyes fixed on her face. For a moment her gaze held his, then the heavy lids drooped enigmatically over his strange amber-coloured eyes, and he seemed to withdraw to a distance again, leaving her with that same lonely ache that this music had induced. She had excused herself rather hurriedly and gone to her room, for once obscurely grateful for the locked door and the sheltering walls, only to come face to face with the same hooded gaze from his namesake, staring down at her from the ornately gilded frame.

- She had made up her mind after that to keep out of the way once dinner was over, but here she was forestalled. The next time she had dined downstairs, she and Nick had been alone, Leo dining in his study with some business papers which had arrived urgently for him from the mainland, Nick explained. He did not join them later either, even when Nick put on a miscellany of romantic tunes and coaxed her into dancing with him. He was an excellent dancer and Joanna could have thoroughly enjoyed herself if it had not been for the thought that at any moment Leo Vargas might emerge from his study to find her in his cousin's arms. Why she should have found that such a disturbing prospect Joanna preferred not to consider too closely, and anyway it did not happen. The study door on the other side of the great tiled expanse of the entrance hall remained tightly shut.
- He was obviously determined to keep her at a distance, she thought, and as her aim was to see as little of him as possible during her enforced stay in his house, then she should have been happy. Yet it was useless to pretend that his attitude made her feel particularly elated or to deny that even the sound of his voice in another room could rouse her to a kind of nerve-jangling awareness that had nothing to do with the fact that he was certainly her jailer and quite possibly a criminal as well.
- But even as she acknowledged the thought, that warning quiver ran along her senses and a shadow fell across the smooth tiles that bordered the pool edge. She did not need to look up to know that Leo Vargas stood beside her. Anyway, to have looked at him she would have had to stare up into the sun, which would have put her at a disadvantage, so she continued to watch the dancing water in feigned unawareness of his presence.
- 'Leo!' Nick's jovial greeting brought that little piece of play-acting to an abrupt end. 'Joanna is boasting that she is a better swimmer than I am. While it is no doubt true, this is a slur on the honour of the Vorghese men which you must wipe out. I insist that you challenge her.'
- 'What makes you think that Signorina Leighton would accept my challenge?'
- She had to look at him then, shading her eyes against the sun's glare. Clad merely in the briefest of swimming trunks he was magnificent, lean but superbly muscled with broad, powerful shoulders. She had felt the smooth strength of his chest under her fingers and she was thankful that the expression in her eyes was hidden from him with the naked longing to touch him again that she knew must be revealed in spite of herself. She was shaken by the feelings his very presence was able to arouse in her. She had always believed that physical desire should go hand in hand with mental harmony in any relationship. Yet she doubted whether she and Leo Vargas shared even a thought in common.
- She said very deliberately, trying to keep her voice cool, 'I would accept any challenge that you issued, *signore*.'

- 'And you accept that in any contest between us there can only be one winner?' He slanted a mocking eyebrow at her.
- 'I do.' Joanna said. 'But I'm not committing myself as to the identity of that winner, she added silently.
- 'Well,' Nick called impatiently, 'are you two going to race each other?'
- 'Not at the moment,' his cousin returned. 'We will hold our contest another time, when terms and conditions have been agreed—and when Signorina Leighton is not too tired by her previous exertions to give of her best.'
- He dropped the towel that was slung across his shoulder to the ground and dived into the pool. His stroke was fast and powerful and his lithe body cut cleanly through the water. And I am not, Joanna thought, going to sit here openly admiring him, which would no doubt boost the noble lord's ego above its present over-inflated limit. She got up casually and wandered across to where Nick was lying face downwards on the lounge. There was a bottle of suntan oil standing with the tray of drinks, sunglasses and other impedimenta on a small wrought iron table beside him, and Joanna unscrewed the cap of the oil-bottle and began to apply some of the liquid to Nick's back and shoulders. He wriggled under her ministrations, contented as a cat.
- 'You have fingers like the wings of butterflies,*cara* ,' he murmured sleepily.
- 'I'm glad you approve,*signore* ,' she made her voice deliberately light and flirtatious.
- 'Oh, I do. But will my cousin Leo approve?'
- 'What is it to do with him?'
- 'Perhaps nothing—perhaps everything. It is just that whenever I see you together I sense a certain—something in the atmosphere.'
- 'You're imagining things,' she said shortly, recapping the bottle.
- 'I hope so,*cara*,' He gave a low chuckle. 'I promise you would find me far more appreciative. Leo has already had more than his fair share of this world's good things, including beautiful girls.'
- Joanna was conscious of a sudden constriction in her throat and realised there was little satisfaction to be gained in having some of her worst suspicions confirmed.
- Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Leo Vargas was pulling himself out of the water and she hastily changed the subject, asking Nick if there were any facilities for water-skiing on the island.
- Nick rolled over and addressed his cousin. 'What happened to that speedboat you had last year when Marisa Fallone was here, Leo?'
- Leo shrugged, looking surprised. 'I think it's stored in the boathouse with the rest of the gear. Why do you ask?'

- 'Joanna wished to ski,' Nick explained.
- 'Oh, it's not important,' Joanna put in quickly. 'I just thought that some of the coves on the island would be ideal, but I don't want to put anyone to any trouble if everything is stored away.'
- 'Oh, it's no trouble. Leo has men just standing around waiting for him to give them a job,' Nick assured her gaily. 'Besides, the boat will have to be overhauled before Marisa's next visit. You will be inviting her later this summer, Leo?'
- Leo gave his young cousin a long look. 'Perhaps,' he drawled.
- He began to dry himself with his towel. Joanna, pouring herself a drink, knew that his eyes were on her. If he was looking to see what effect the news that he possessed a regular girl-friend called Marisa Fallone had on her, he was going to be disappointed, she thought, taking a composed sip.
- When he spoke, his voice held a slight edge of amusement. 'Am I not to be anointed with sun oil in my turn, *signorina*, or is that only Nick's privilege?'
- Joanna swallowed nervously. 'Because you keep me in a room like a harem it does not necessarily mean that I have to act like your slave, *signore*,' she said tautly, and flinched at the sudden blaze of anger in the brilliant tawny eyes.
- Nick interposed hastily. 'What would you like to do tomorrow, Joanna? Shall we take some lunch and explore the old forts? You have seen little of the island up to now. I warn you, you may be disappointed. Some of the forts are little better than heaps of stones, but there might be a few rusty cannons left.'
- Joanna accepted eagerly, noting that Leo Vargas did not raise any objections to her leaving the *palazzo* for the first time. He must be very sure of his security arrangements, she thought.
- She found herself regretting her childish piece of rudeness just now, but it was impossible for her to explain to him that feeling as she did, even the thought of touching his bare skin set up uncontrollable tremors all over her body.
- 'It will soon be time to change for dinner,' Nick observed, glancing at his watch. 'Will Joanna be joining us downstairs this evening, Leo?'
- 'If she wishes, but perhaps she may prefer to remain in her harem,' Leo Vargas said coldly.
- Joanna faced him awkwardly. 'I'm—I'm sorry for what I said, *signore*. I shall be glad to dine with you.'
- '*Benissimo*,' he said abruptly. 'Josef will bring you to the *sala* for cocktails as usual, then.'
- He turned away, picking up his towel. Joanna hesitated for a moment, then she went after him, catching him at the tall wrought iron gate which gave access to the pool from the grounds.
- '*Signore*—please may I not be locked in my room any more?' She saw him frown slightly and went on quickly, 'I so hate being shut in. Maybe I'm a little claustrophobic.'
- 'What guarantee do I have that you won't do something foolish if I agree to your request?'

- 'I—I promise I won't try to escape, if that's what you mean,' she said a little huskily. For the time being, her conscience silently amended.
- 'No?' His eyes narrowed. 'Well, I must take your word, I suppose, *signorina*, your parole. I have that, do I?'
- 'Yes,' she said with a sigh. 'Yes, I give you my parole.'
- '*Va bene*. I think you are being wise.' He unexpectedly put out his hand, lifting her chin so that she fully met his gaze. For a moment he held her so and his thumb brushed lightly across the full curve of her lower lip. It was the merest thread of a caress, but it awakened every clamouring pulse in her slim body, making her want to seize his hand and lift it to her cheek, her lips, her breast. She was shattered by her own reaction and immediately let the long sweep of her lashes veil her eyes and the total revelation that might be in them. His hand fell away and his voice was as cool as ever as he said, 'Now you must excuse me. I will see you at dinner.'
- Joanna trailed rather listlessly back to the poolside, ignoring Nick's quizzical glance. So she had been forced into giving him her word, but surely a promise made under duress could not be considered binding, she told herself defiantly.
- Even if she had not been his prisoner, she now had an even more telling reason for getting away from Saracina and from him, she realised. He had an altogether too disturbing effect on her. It would be only too easy to forget that she had a life of her own waiting for her and abandon herself thoughtlessly to this timeless existence here on Saracina. And inevitably that would lead to a closer relationship with the master of Saracina. It was no use fooling herself, she thought drearily. It might be a once-in-a-lifetime thing for her, but for him it would merely be another in a series of affairs, and she could not accept the hurt and ultimate rejection that implied in order to enjoy a temporary sensual satisfaction.
- She found herself wondering what it would be like to be the only woman in Leo Vargas' life. Had he ever cared for anyone in more than a transitory manner—this Marisa Fallone, for instance?
- She allowed herself a brief, melancholy smile. It would be far easier, she thought, if she wanted Nick. The girl who had defied everyone to come to Saracina could have met Nick Vargas, flirted with him and parted from him when it was over with no bones broken on either side. But that girl did not seem to exist any more. She had known what she wanted, instead of being a prey to conflicting emotions that threatened to tear her apart. Lion's prey, she jeered at herself.
- She began to collect her belongings together, telling Nick that she wanted to have a bath before changing for dinner. Somewhat to her amusement, he insisted on escorting her back to the house and up to the corridor where her room was situated. In spite of her parole to his cousin, it was obvious that he intended to continue to keep a close eye on her.
- It was almost a relief to be back in her room and alone. It was pleasant too to be able to close the door behind her and not hear the telltale click as the key turned in the lock, she thought.
- She had a long leisurely soak in warm, scented water, before dressing herself in one of her favourite gowns—a long white caftan, its deep vee neck, sleeves and hem trimmed with thick gold thread. She piled her gleaming copper hair into a sleek coil on top of her head, and attached

fringed gold earrings to the lobes of her ears. She was just spraying on some perfume when an odd noise came to her ears. Someone nearby was whistling—and not very well either, Joanna thought with a slight amused grimace. Surely it couldn't be Josef coming to fetch her. He was far too well trained a servant to do anything so undignified as whistle his way down the *palazzo's* marble-floored corridors. Besides, it seemed to be coming from outside.

- Giving way to her curiosity, she got up and went to the window. The sun was setting and the sea was glowing gold and pink under a turbulent sky. She had always been too preoccupied with the bars that held her in to care very much about the immediate view of the grounds to be gained from her window. Now she saw that her room overlooked a long gravelled walk bordered by cypresses. It was not particularly familiar, and she wondered if it was part of the grounds that she had explored with Nick.
- A man was strolling along this walk, his hands behind his back, and there was no need to wonder any more where the untuneful noises were coming from. Joanna wondered who he was. He was shorter than either of the Vorghese men and not nearly as elegant. The suit he was wearing looked thick and rather clumsy and his dark, greying hair was cut short without any real effort at style. Yet he did not have the air of a servant either, or the physique of any of the security grounds she had seen patrolling discreetly. Another guest? she wondered.
- At least she recognised the tune he was attempting to render. It was the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria Rusticana* and not the most obvious choice for a summer evening stroll in a cypress walk, Joanna thought, grinning. Mischievously she watched him approach and when he was directly under her window, she began to whistle with him, joining harmoniously in the same tune. Immediately he checked and looked up. In the long shadows of the setting sun, his face was an alarmed blur and she waved to him reassuringly.
- 'It's all right, *signore* ,' she called. 'I'm staying here too. Perhaps we'll meet at dinner...'
- She broke off in surprise. The man had turned and was running away down the walk, back in the direction he had come from.
- Joanna turned away from the window with a shrug, then laughed as she caught a glimpse of her pale reflection in the white dress in the mirror.
- 'He must have thought I was a ghost,' she thought. 'No wonder he ran!'
- She was still smiling when Josef knocked and entered a few minutes later.
- 'The *signorina* is happy tonight. She has enjoyed her day?' he asked.
- 'Very much,' Joanna nodded. 'But, Josef, the funniest thing,' and she quickly related what had just happened.
- But it was evident that Josef did not share her amusement at the little man's rout. He stared at her in open dismay.
- '*Scusi, signorina*. I must speak with the *signore* . Please to wait here until I return.'
- What in the world? Joanna thought as she stared after him. Surely she hadn't said anything that would cause that kind of reaction? She had startled the stranger, true enough, but even if he was

some honoured guest of Leo Vargas, she had done no real harm.

- Feeling suddenly tense, she sat down on her dressing stool. Could that little man in the badly fitting suit have anything to do with the *palazzo's* secret? It didn't seem possible. He looked far too ordinary to be involved in anything criminal or even vaguely sinister.
- Josef was so long in returning that she began to think she had been forgotten and would have to forgo her dinner as penance for having frightened the stranger. When he did come, he was quiet and formal and ushered her down to the *sala* on the ground floor with barely a word.
- Nick was waiting for her by himself, immaculate in evening dress but also curiously ill at ease. He handed her a glass.
- 'Dry Martini, *cara*.'
- 'Thank you,' she said, then impulsively put her hand on his arm. 'Nick, what's happened? I saw this man in the garden and...'
- 'Oh, that,' he gave a rather constrained laugh. 'Josef told us that you had nearly frightened one of the gardeners to death. The poor man did not realise that particular room was occupied. By the way, you must excuse Leo again this evening. He received a radio message from the mainland just now and has to work through dinner.'
- 'I quite understand.' Joanna gave him a bright smile. So it was true, then. She had seen something, or at least someone, that she should not have done, and it seemed to have started a mass panic. Perhaps she had at last scored a minor triumph in this game of cat and mouse she was playing with the master of Saracina.
- She smiled again and slid her arm through Nick's. 'Shall we have dinner?' she suggested gaily. 'Suddenly I have the most tremendous appetite.'
- It was an edgy meal with Nick obviously preoccupied and having to exert himself to play the attentive host. On the surface, everything was just the same, with excellent food and the usual impeccable service by the neat menservants in their green uniforms. Even without women, the *palazzo* seemed to function on well-oiled and totally unobtrusive wheels, Joanna thought wonderingly. Only Josef was missing from his usual supervisory role, standing by the sideboard watching the service of the meal with eagle eyes for any lapse in standards.
- When dinner was over, Joanna agreed readily to Nick's suggestion that they should drink their coffee on the terrace. The air was warm and still and heavy with the scent of flowers. Joanna walked to the head of the wide stone steps which led down to the gardens and stood looking longingly into the perfumed darkness.
- 'It's a wonderful evening for a walk,' she said dreamily.
- 'Then we will walk,' Nick took her arm companionably and they set off down the steps towards the broad gravelled walk that stretched away in front of them.
- As they walked Nick told her that the gardens had been laid out by the Vorghese prince who had lived on Saracina in the eighteenth century.



- 'He wished to re-create the kind of landscape that was familiar on the mainland,' he said, shrugging. 'But in spite of the formality it has a certain antique charm, don't you agree? He demolished the wall which used to surround the grounds at this end as well. He probably realised it was unnecessary when the sea is a more than adequate barrier against intruders. Most intruders, anyway,' he added with a sly sideways glance that made Joanna flush slightly.
- 'How do we get on to the cliffs?' she asked.
- 'We just keep walking. There is nowhere in the grounds that is too far from the sea.' He pointed to where the tall hedges met in a dark archway ahead of them. As they stepped through, Joanna caught her breath in sheer exhilaration. They stood on a narrow tongue of land, surrounded on both sides by the shifting restless sea. On the farthest horizon, a dark blur showed.
- 'Corsica,' Nick told her.
- Briefly she thought of Tony and the others, and wondered if they had returned with the *Luana* to Cannes yet. The cruise seemed almost as if it had taken place in another lifetime, she thought, and shivered slightly.
- 'You are cold. I will fetch you a wrap,' Nick said instantly.
- 'You mean you will actually leave me here alone?' Joanna lifted her brows at him incredulously and observed his obvious embarrassment with satisfaction, but he gave her one of his engaging grins.
- 'I trust you implicitly, *cara* ,' he declared. 'Besides, where could you go? You are not dressed for scrambling down the cliff, even if there was a way. And also,' he gestured towards the cliff-edge, 'I leave you with another protector.'
- He appeared to be indicating a large boulder which had been positioned almost at the furthest tip of land, and he grinned again at her puzzled look before he vanished back between the crowding cypress hedges towards the dark mass of the *palazzo* .
- The remaining light was fading rapidly and the faint glow which still lingered in the western sky would soon be replaced by the paler wash of moonlight, Joanna realised. In spite of the proximity of the house and the grounds, this headland was a lonely place, and she hoped Nick would hurry. On an impulse, she bent and slipped off the frivolous gilt strapped sandals she wore, relishing the feel of the short tussocky grass under her feet as she wandered towards the solitary boulder, impelled by vague curiosity. As she neared it, she realised it had begun to take on a positive shape and that the solid mass of rock had been carved into a representation of a crouching animal.
- It was—it could only have been, she thought resignedly, a lion, facing the sea and the marauders it might bring, crouched in menace with one threatening paw upraised.
- The carving itself was old. The stone was weather-beaten, and lichen grew in its more sheltered crevices, but in spite of the blurring that time and storms had brought about, nothing could dispel the power and defiance that still emanated from the great stone beast.
- 'So you see the Lion of Saracina exists after all, *signorina* .'

- He had come silently over the grass and was standing only a few feet away from her, a shadowed figure in the gathering darkness. Her first startled recoil flung her bruisingly back against the stone itself and she heard his brief muttered '*Dio!*'
- He pulled her away from the stone without gentleness, his hands pushing aside the sleeve of her caftan to examine the graze on her arm.
- 'You have hurt yourself?'
- She tried unsuccessfully to tug herself away. The touch of his fingers on her skin revived too many disturbing memories.
- 'I'm all right. You—you just startled me.' She despised herself for the shake in her voice. She wanted to be calm, to convince him that no matter what had happened to her because of him, she had been able to retain her poise. Yet she was forced to admit that it was impossible and that the mere fact of his proximity was enough to reduce her to a dry-mouthed stammering gaucherie.
- 'You must forgive me.'
- 'I'll add it to the list,' she took refuge in pertness.
- 'The list of the wrongs I have done you?' His teeth gleamed momentarily in a smile. 'But what are they, after all, compared with the advantages you have enjoyed since you came here?'
- 'Advantages?' She stared at him, incredulously. 'Now I know you're mad! How can you speak of advantages when I've been locked up—terrified almost out of my wits—watched as if I was the criminal instead of...'
- She faltered to a halt, aware of a sudden bleakness in the eyes fixed on her face.
- 'You were saying, *signorina* ?' he prompted blandly.
- 'You know what I mean,' she whispered, gripping her hands together.
- 'Do I?' He smiled grimly. 'You want me to confess my crimes? Very well. I have locked you in your room—for reasons of safety. I have had some experience of your insatiable curiosity, remember, and equally have little reason to trust your discretion, but—we shall see, now that you are locked in no more.'
- 'And the grille over the window? Will that also be removed?'
- 'Ah, yes. The harem latticework which has angered you so. That, I regret, must remain. But not, I promise you, to bolster any fantasies I may have about the women who occupy that room at times. It is merely that the stonework of the little balcony outside the window is un-safe, and the grille ensures that no one will be tempted to take any risks, not even you, *signorina* .'
- She flushed a little at the bite in his words, as he went on, 'As to my other—crimes, so I have you watched—or you could say instead I have provided you with a companion near enough to your own age to ensure that you are not bored while you are my guest. As to your being frightened out of your wits, Signorina Leighton, I see no sign of that. I find your wits quite

unaffected by your professed ordeal at my hands, and I advise you to look long and hard in your mirror before you deny that there have been any advantages in your stay here. The girl who came to Saracina uninvited was strained and tense. It showed in her eyes—in her responses and reactions. She had lived like a butterfly and the boredom of such a life had trapped her.'

- He paused and his voice became lower. 'That girl has gone, Joanna, and someone else has taken her place. Someone who may be frightened and angry, but who is alive and aware as well. Someone who has learned that uncertainty can add a spice to life that was never there before.'
- 'I don't think you have any right to say that,' she accused him, her voice trembling slightly. 'I was perfectly happy—with Tony.'
- 'And you have also been perfectly happy without him.' He shook his head and she knew that he was smiling. 'It is not how I would wish the woman I loved to feel, *cara* .'
- 'No, of course not,' she came back at him furiously. 'You would expect her to belong to you body and soul, I suppose, with no hope of ever having a separate identity or a life of her own.'
- 'It is a contradiction of the nature of love to talk of it in terms of separateness. Joanna. There is no warmth or generosity in the type of relationship you describe. Why settle for milk and water, *mia* , when you could have wine?'
- His body was as hard against hers as the rock she had almost clung to for refuge, but with a warmth that seemed to penetrate to the very marrow of her bones. Her hands came up to brace themselves against his chest, her little cry of protest stifled under his mouth. The dark velvet of the sky sequinned with stars swung in a dizzying arc before her eyes closed and she yielded to the overwhelming sensual delight of his kiss.
- He groaned her name as his hands slid down her slender back to her hips, holding her against him in a shattering intimacy which made no secret of his desire for her.
- His mouth descended on hers again with a fierceness that drove the breath from her body. Totally acquiescent to the demands he was making of her, she clung to him, her fingers gripping almost convulsively the white silk of his shirt. At last he put her from him, his hands tangling in her dishevelled hair, forcing her head back so that he could look down into her face.
- 'That is the fault of wine, *mia* .' His own voice was breathless. 'It goes to one's head, as you go to mine. Now I must take you back to the *palazzo* before I am tempted to add a seduction here on the grass to the list of wrongs I have done you.'
- Joanna stared up into the dark face, only a few inches from her own. Only one coherent thought was emerging from the welter of emotion that possessed her. Leo Vargas could not want her as she wanted him if he could so easily draw back after what had just passed between them. He had refused her wordless offer, and the humiliation was as great as if she had begged him aloud to become her lover.
- With a supreme effort, she controlled the sob that was rising in her throat and stepped backwards, away from him.
- 'Oh, come, *signore* .' She kept her voice miraculously light and crisp. 'A few kisses in the moonlight are one thing, and you're certainly very attractive, but you can't imagine that I would

have let things go any further.' She forced a giggle.

- It was too dark for her to read the expression on his face, but the disgust was plain in his voice when he eventually spoke.
- 'My newspaper cuttings on you were incomplete, *signorina*. They suggested that you were young and rather foolish, but they did not give the impression that you were also a tease. It's a dangerous role, *cara*, and I advise you to have a care in future when you choose a partner for your sick little games. Now I will escort you back to the *palazzo*.'
- 'Just a moment,' she halted him, feeling utterly crushed and foolish. 'My—my shoes. I've lost them.'
- He muttered something under his breath, and stood waiting with obvious impatience while she raked around in the clumps of undergrowth round the base of the statue for the missing sandals. At last she found them, and stood awkwardly trying to fit them on to her feet without overbalancing.
- 'Take my arm,' he offered coldly.
- She was glad the darkness hid her unhappy flush. 'It's all right, thank you. I've—I've managed.'
- 'Don't sound so nervous,' he jibed at her. 'I shan't force any more of my attentions on you. Apart from your own apparently double standards of behaviour, my cousin is almost certain to return at any moment, which could be embarrassing for us both.'
- Joanna trailed after him miserably, stumbling a little on the rough patches of undergrowth. The scent of crushed myrtle seemed to be everywhere, and she knew that for ever after she would associate its bitter-sweetness with her own unhappiness.

## • CHAPTER SIX



- It was swelteringly hot that night and Joanna, tossing restlessly, felt that even the simple covering of a sheet was almost too much to bear.
- Another brilliant cloudless morning dawned, with not even the slightest breeze to move the still air.
- Nick gloomily predicted that a thunderstorm was on the way, and Joanna agreed that the atmosphere was certainly brooding and oppressive enough.
- 'I don't think the storm will break before we have had our picnic at the ruins—if that is still your wish,' Nick said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. They were breakfasting on the terrace in the little harbour which provided a certain amount of shade. 'I wish Leo would have air-conditioning installed,' he added rather fretfully. 'My room was like an oven last night.'
- Joanna smiled. 'I would have thought air-conditioning was rather too progressive for a place like

Saracina.'

- Nick shrugged. 'For Saracina, maybe, but not for Leo. He likes modernity. You should see the kitchens. His father modernised them and Leo has improved on his design. They're like the control deck of a pace ship.'
- 'That's not my picture at all,' Joanna admitted. 'I had a vision of huge open ranges, and copper pans and garlic, with smoked hams hanging from the ceiling.'
- Nick's eyes twinkled. 'Very traditional, *cara*, but not very practical. Leo spends at least half the year in the States, and that is where he has developed his ideas on efficiency.'
- 'He speaks perfect English,' Joanna said slowly. 'I suppose that is why.'
- 'We have all spoken English from our cradles as a second language, and we have to be fluent in French as well.' Nick explained. 'Leo visits Britain often too. In fact Saracina is probably the only link with the old country that he has left. He has never looked on himself as being solely Italian. He believes in internationalism and has moulded the Vargas Corporation accordingly since he took over at its head.'
- 'Is that why he also considers himself apparently above the law?'
- 'Oh, Joanna!' Nick looked uncomfortable. 'Does it never seem to you that there are some laws which would be better broken?'
- 'That's no answer. If everyone felt like that we would be left with anarchy. Ordinary men and women get sent to jail every day for the sort of actions that seem everyday occurrences in your cousin's sphere. Is it right that he should get away with it, simply because he's richer and more powerful than other people, when he deserves prison just like any other law-breaker?'
- She saw Nick, obviously embarrassed, looking past her rather than at her, and guessed with a sinking heart that they were no longer alone.
- 'Who deserves jail?' Leo Vargas dropped into the remaining seat at the table and reached for the coffee pot.
- 'Joanna says you do because you are an anarchist,' Nick said, grinning, and Joanna was mortified to see the same amusement reflected in Leo Vargas's eyes.
- 'I think I'll go up to my room until we're ready to leave, Nick,' she said, hurriedly pushing back her chair and rising. 'What time are we setting off?'
- Nick glanced at his watch. 'I'll have the car at the front door by eleven,' he promised.
- Joanna walked back along the terrace and entered the *salotto* by the french windows. She was halfway across the room to the door when she remembered that she had left her sunglasses on the table. Although it was more than likely that the ubiquitous Josef would deliver them to her when the meal was over, she decided to go back for them.
- She was just emerging on to the terrace when she was halted in her tracks by Nick's urgent voice, and stayed where she was, her presence masked by a large flowering bush growing

against the wall.

- 'You are sure she knows nothing?' he was saying.
- 'What can she know?' Leo sounded calm. 'They were on board that boat of theirs for ten days before they arrived at Calista. They will have heard no broadcasts and seen no papers. You worry too much.'
- Joanna, straining her ears, heard Nick mutter something about 'so much at stake.'
- Leo's voice was incisive. 'True, but do not forget we are only go-betweens in this. Anyway, the girl is my responsibility and they have accepted her as such.'
- Joanna turned and slipped back into the *salotto*, speeding across the room to the door and the approximate safety of the hall. She was in a state of utter confusion over what she had just heard.
- Just what were the noble Vorghese family involved in as go-betweens, and what did news broadcasts and papers have to do with it?
- In the quiet of her room she flung herself on the bed and began to think. Leo Vargas was wrong. She had seen a newspaper since her arrival in the area—the English paper that Tony had brought back from Calista. She frowned, trying to remember what the main items had been, although it seemed most unlikely that they would have any relevance to what was going on at the *palazzo*. What had there been—some political row over a conference, she remembered vaguely, and a bank robbery.
- Joanna sat up slowly. A bank robbery, she repeated to herself. Could it be? She remembered a crystal goblet smashing to the ground and Josef's frightened face when she had joked about Leo Vargas having made off with the Vorghese millions. But just now on the terrace he had said he was only a go-between. Did this mean that someone else perhaps had done the robbery and he was now sheltering them on Saracina until the hue and cry died down?
- She shook her head bewilderedly. She knew from odd scraps of information overheard at her father's dinner parties from time to time that the Vargas Corporation was a vast concern of world-wide importance and respected as such. Was it possible that the head of the corporation and the driving force behind it was nothing better than a crook, stealing from his own workforce and shareholders? She could not believe it, and yet what other answer was there?
- She turned her head unwillingly and looked at the portrait of the first Lion of Saracina, all pride and tawny virility and a villain to his elegant fingertips, she thought unhappily. Perhaps this total amorality was another strain that only showed itself once in so many generations along with the distinctive hair and smouldering amber eyes.
- She gave a small bitter sigh. Well, she had wanted to believe the worst of Leo Vargas. It was odd then that the achievement of her wish brought her no sense of triumph, only a chilling disappointment which left her strangely bereft.
- And Nick too was involved in this gigantic conspiracy, and presently she would go on this picnic with him, and have to laugh and talk as if nothing had happened. Of course, as far as he was concerned, nothing had. He had no idea that she had overheard that brief snatch of conversation with his cousin. They still thought she knew nothing, whereas in reality she knew too much for her



own peace of mind.

- She supposed wretchedly that the little man with his ecstatically inaccurate rendering of the Easter Hymn was one of the gang, come out of hiding to enjoy the evening air, who had wandered into the wrong part of the garden by mistake.
- Had the gang then been as unaware of her presence as she had been of theirs? It explained why she had been smuggled into the *palazzo* under a jacket and why she had been forced to remain against her will. Leo Vargas had taken responsibility for her, presumably to make sure she did not get away and raise any alarm before the rest of the gang had dispersed. She wondered what might have happened to her if he had not decided to extend his protection to her, and shivered a little.
- She got up and started to pace restlessly round the room, in spite of the cloying heat. She must get away from this place and tell the authorities what was going on. She had no choice, in spite of her unwilling attraction to Leo Vargas. A man's practised expertise as a lover could not be enough to excuse his criminal activities, at least in her eyes, she told herself.
- She felt cold and sickened, as much at the thought of never seeing Leo again as by the realisation of what he had done. Whatever kind of a rogue he was, he had taught her in a few short moments what it was to be a woman, and changed her irrevocably. She would never again be content with second best in a relationship. Yet without him, what else was there for her? She was dismayed at the deep waters her attraction to him had led her into.
- It was useless telling herself that she was crazy. That for him she had been merely an interlude, because there was no one else, not even the beautiful Marisa Fallone, available. She remembered Nick's words with painful clarity: 'When he needs a woman, one comes to him, believe me.'
- She gave a little involuntary sob, then took a fresh grip on herself. Falling in love with Leo Vargas was an in-diligence that she could not afford. The most he would ever want would be a brief physical relationship, and he would not thank her for burdening him with unwanted emotional demands. But in turn, could she bear to be merely the plaything he wanted, if that was all he was to ask of her? She sighed and shook her head. She had always imagined that when she belonged to a man it would be as part of a permanent relationship, and she had never wanted to take part in the promiscuous affairs that many of her friends accepted as quite normal conduct. Her behaviour with Leo had been totally out of character, and she was bewildered and chagrined by her own lack of control and the confused emotions that prompted it.
- She was heavy-eyed and listless by the time she went in search of Nick, and he expressed immediate concern and suggested they should postpone their trip to another day. But Joanna refused. The car waiting for them was a low-slung sports model with the hood down and she felt that a drive could be just what she needed to blow some of her blues away. She was wearing a plain cream shift dress, deeply scooped at the neckline, back and front, to show off her tan, and she tied a matching cream scarf over her hair to protect it from the dusty roads before taking her place in the passenger seat beside Nick.
- 'These are yours, are they not, *carat*?' Nick casually handed her a pair of sunglasses—those she had left on the breakfast table—and she gulped her thanks, glad that he was fitting the key into the ignition and had not noticed her guilty blush as she took them.
- They drove out of the courtyard of the *palazzo*, past the cool splash of the tall fountain which

formed its centrepiece and through the iron gates which slid open as if by magic when the car approached.

- 'Another of Leo's American gadgets,' Nick indicated with a grin, and she nodded, smiling faintly. The perfect fortress, she thought, perfectly guarded.
- Away from the towering walls of the *palazzo* and whatever they concealed, Joanna felt a new sense of freedom. In, spite of the sultriness of the day, the air was fresh with unusual scents. Nick said little as he drove, leaving her to enjoy the scenery. The narrow road bordered by tall rocks interspersed with cypresses and eucalyptus trees on one side, and a plunge down the cliffside to the restless sea on the other, required most of his attention.
- Occasionally they passed through small hamlets built where the rock had given way to soil that could be cultivated and Nick slowed, sounding his horn for the groups of dark-haired children invariably absorbed in the centre of the highway in the games that occupy children the world over. Women dressed in black, with headscarves covering their hair, came to stand at their doorways and smile as the car sped by.
- 'We are basking in Leo's glory, you understand,' Nick said lightly, acknowledging the salutations with a wave. 'It is the owner of this car who is being honoured, not its occupants.'
- Joanna remained unhappily silent. She wondered what would happen to the people on this tiny island who looked to the Vorghese family for employment and sustenance if Leo Vargas was arrested. Would anyone carry on the industries he had set up? And what of the *palazzo*, left masterless, and the work it provided for the local townspeople in the house itself and the grounds? She had little doubt that even some of the security guards were local men. Her own misery seemed selfish and insignificant when compared with the hardship for the islanders that the downfall of the Vorghese family could bring in its wake. The repercussions on the international finance scene would also be inconceivable, she thought.
- 'Another day we will go to see the cascade,' Nick was saying. 'For that we take the other road towards the interior and travel up to the *col*. It is the highest point on the island. And soon I should be able to show you the town.'
- The first lot of fortifications they reached were rather a disappointment, being, as Nick had warned, reduced to a haphazard pile of mossy grey stones.
- 'Half the stones are missing,' Nick explained. 'For years the islanders have been using them to repair their houses.'
- 'The same thing happened in Britain after Hadrian's Wall was overrun,' Joanna recalled.
- Nick grinned. 'Some were used as missiles as well,' he said. 'When stocks of cannon balls were running low, the islanders used to throw rocks from the defences themselves to knock the invaders back into the sea.'
- 'But they didn't always win?'
- 'Not always. The island was overrun by Barbary pirates on more than one occasion and some of our ancestors were actually held to ransom. The men, that is. The women suffered less honourable fates, I fear. The mistress of the *palazzo* was treated no differently from the peasants

in that respect. During one raid Prince Lorenzo Vorghese's three young daughters were carried off and never heard of again.'

- 'I think a little of the Barbary blood has survived to the present day,' Joanna said acidly, and Nick threw back his head and laughed.
- 'Oh, the world will hear from you again, Joanna,' he teased. 'Have no fear of that. And your fate will only be as dishonourable as you choose. After all, why force a woman when to persuade her can be so much more rewarding?'
- Joanna smiled perfunctorily, but his words roused too many disturbing memories of the previous evening for comfort. She said hurriedly, 'By the way, you never explained to me what that statue of the lion was doing on the headland.'
- 'What chance did I have?' he protested. 'By the time I found your wrap and came to look for you, you were half-way back to the house with Leo. Why didn't you ask him to tell you its history?'
- 'We were talking of other things,' she said awkwardly, wishing she had not raised the subject, but he merely gave a slight shrug.
- 'The carving was done by a local man after the first Leo Vorghese had settled on Saracina. It was he who organised the islanders into their first rough defensive system before the forts were built and the carving was made in honour of their first victory against some enemy—or that is the legend. Later there were—other legends,' he added, grinning.
- 'Such as?'
- 'Oh, very romantic, *cara*. The islanders had to seek their new lord's permission to marry, you understand, and when a girl was finally married to the man she loved she used to hang her bridal wreath over the lion's paw as a way of saying thanks to the Lion of Saracina himself.'
- 'I think that's rather charming,' Joanna said.
- 'But later the custom fell into disrepute, alas, when it was found that some of the more forward of the *ragazzi* were hanging garlands of flowers on the statue as a way of attracting the Lion's attention to their charms. Gradually it became accepted that if a girl hung a flower garland on the lion's paw she was saying in effect "I'm yours, if you want me." It wasn't long before parents were watching their pretty daughters to make sure they went nowhere near it.'
- Joanna smiled faintly. 'I suppose that was where that saying about the gift for the Lion came from.'
- He laughed. 'Almost certainly, I would say, *cara*.'
- The next fort was in a much better state of preservation, still maintaining some semblance of its towerlike structure. Nick parked the car at the side of the road and they walked through thick undergrowth redolent with the scents of lavender, rosemary and honeysuckle where enormous dark red butterflies hovered like exotic blossoms borne on an invisible breeze.
- The cannon which had once been the mainstay of the fort had vanished long since, but Nick

showed Joanna the opening in the wall where the defenders had hauled it to fire on the Saracen or Barbary marauders as their galleys approached the beaches.

- 'At one time, every headland on this side of the island was occupied by a garrison, and the *palazzo* itself was heavily fortified,' Nick remarked, spreading a rug on a piece of turf for their meal. 'When things were peaceful the soldiers must have sat here just as we do now, eating and playing dice or cards, perhaps. Or,' his tone took on a distinctly caressing note and he laid his hand over hers as she helped straighten the corner of the rug, 'maybe they even made love to their sweethearts.'
- Joanna freed her hand with a jerk. 'I hardly think so,' she commented crisply. 'I would have thought all the women would have taken refuge in the sixteenth-century equivalent of an air raid shelter at times like those.'
- Nick sighed dejectedly, 'You are not very romantic, Joannamia .'
- 'Perhaps I don't like having love made to me to order,' she said lightly.
- He stared at her. 'You cannot think such a thing.'
- 'Can't I? Are you trying to pretend that I'm not here with you now, sitting in the sunshine eating chicken and drinking wine simply because your cousin decided it would be more convenient to have me away from the *palazzo* for a few hours—for reasons of his own? What is it, I wonder? More non-existent visitors arriving on non-existent helicopters?'
- He burst out laughing. 'Brava, Joanna! You are an incredible girl. No wonder Leo finds you too much of a distraction when he has so much urgent business to deal with. You are right, of course. I am to keep you away for a while. But I assure you that I have no orders to make love to you. That is entirely my own idea.'
- 'It's not a very good idea, Nick,' she said quietly, pulling restlessly at a small pink blossom growing beside her.
- 'Why not? The sun is warm, the wine is good and we are very much alone. The English boy-friend is miles away, and what he does not know he will never regret.'
- It was on the tip of her tongue to protest that Tony's possible reaction was the last thing on her mind, but she remained silent. Better for Nick to suppose mistakenly that it was loyalty to Tony that held her back than to search for other motives, and perhaps discover the sorry truth.
- He reached out gently, taking the beaker of wine from her unresisting hand and putting it down on a convenient stone.
- 'Relax, *cara* ,' he murmured, his fingers sliding questioningly up her bare arm. 'It's a beautiful day. Maybe together we can make it perfect.'
- With a little sigh, she allowed him to kiss her. His lips were warm and gentle as they moved on hers and he smelt expensively of cologne. She could hear the hum of bees, drunken with pollen as they sailed heavily among the blossoms of the *maquis* around them, and feel the sun beating on her eyelids. She wished almost desperately that Nick's kisses could mean something to her, that they would rouse her from this curious sense of detachment which was her prevailing emotion.

He was young and attractive and probably a very good lover, she thought remotely. It was a pity he would never get the response he was seeking from her.

- Eventually he drew back, staring down at her, frowning a little.
- 'What is it, Joanna? You are not cold—your eyes and mouth tell a different story. Do you dislike me?'
- 'No, of course I don't,' she said wretchedly. But I—I am almost engaged and...'
- 'So Leo told me, but he also said he did not believe that you really loved this man.' Nick's eyes narrowed. 'Now why should he think that, Joanna? Have you given my noble cousin reason to doubt your feelings towards your fiancé?'
- 'No!' The monosyllable was jerked out of her. 'I—I've told you how I feel about Leo.'
- 'What have words to do with it?' he said moodily. 'You can tell me what you will, but I have seen that look in your eyes, that glow on your skin which says louder than any words that you want to be loved. I know now that it is not meant for me, so I ask myself whom it is for, and I do not like the answer that springs to mind.'
- 'You're imagining things,' she protested, conscious of how weak her rebuttal sounded. 'You Latin men seem to think that women are all the same—just looking for someone to make love to them. All I want is to get away from this island and go on with my own life.'
- He laughed shortly. 'And what kind of a life is that without love in it?' he challenged her. 'Your protestations don't deceive me, *cara*, and I am sorry for you because you are a fool.'
- 'Why?' Joanna faced him indignantly. 'Because I don't want you to make love to me? Of all the conceited...'
- 'No, no,' he said impatiently. 'Because it is Leo's lovemaking you want. I thought you had more pride, Joanna, than to be merely another "gift for the Lion". He has already had a surfeit of such gifts, or why do you suppose he sent for me?'
- Joanna's face felt stiff and her voice seemed to come from a long way away.
- 'Are you trying to say I've just been handed on—like an unwanted package?'
- Nick sighed. 'Not exactly. But you are not like the usual girls who come here in search of Leo. You would want more of him—maybe even a wedding ring. I tell you, *cara*, you are crying for the moon. He has never been involved with any woman to that extent. Besides, you are the daughter of a man who moves in his own world, so he must be wary.'
- 'Am I to understand then that Leo sent for you to prevent me becoming a possible embarrassment to him?' she asked carefully. 'As—as a chaperon even?'
- 'What else?' He studied her face gently. 'I am sorry, *cara*, but in spite of your undoubted attraction for him an affair with you is one luxury that even Leo cannot afford. The price he might have to pay would be too high.'

- 'I notice you don't share his scruples,' she flung at him.
- He shrugged. 'I think we could be happy together, *cara*. I haven't Leo's wealth, it is true, but I am far from poor and my mother would welcome my settling down. She wants grandchildren.'
- 'Are you proposing to me?'
- 'I think it is too early for that, Joanna, but one day I hope you will allow me to speak to your father.'
- If she had not been so hurt and angry, she could have been touched by the odd formality of his speech. As it was, she shook away the hand he placed on her arm with a little inarticulate sound.
- Out of her pain and indignation, a voice was crying, 'But he had no reason—no reason to think like that!' But even as she heard the words reverberating in her ears she knew they were not the whole truth. She had given him reason enough by her own unexpected surrender to his kisses. He could not know that he was the only man whose mouth had ever roused her to such a fever of longing. He could even have written her off as a typical product of the permissive generation, but at the same time forbidden fruit because of her family background, she thought with fresh agony—desirable, but dangerous, and more fitted for his younger, marriage-minded cousin.
- She saw Nick was watching her with concern and forced a smile to her quivering lips, trying to conceal her inner turmoil from him. She supposed he had considered he was being cruel to be kind. After all, what a waste of time and emotion to hanker after a man who had already cold-bloodedly decided to cut you out of his life, because, however desirable, you were a threat to his bachelor way of life.
- Little wonder that he had found it apparently so easy to let her go the previous night, she thought bitterly. He had accused her of playing games with emotions, but was he really any better himself?
- She picked up her beaker again, and lifted it in a caricature of a toast. 'To the future,' she announced, trying to sound gay. 'Whatever it may hold.'
- When they had eaten and re-packed the hamper, Nick drove further round the coast, pointing out other sections of the fortifications and the best bathing beaches as he went. They laughed and chatted as before, but Joanna sensed an awkwardness between them that had not existed hitherto and she regretted the loss of his carefree companionship which had helped to make her time on the island so much easier.
- The darkening of the sky over the sea and a faint, distant rumble of thunder sent them speeding back to the *palazzo* eventually, the first heavy drops of rain beginning to fall as the great iron gates rolled silently back to admit them to the courtyard.
- Joanna went straight up to her room, pleading a slight headache, and she used the same excuse when Josef brought the inevitable invitation for her to dine in the *sola*. He exclaimed at her pale cheeks and over-bright eyes and went away to fetch a carafe of chilled fruit juice and some pain-killers, and later brought her a tray with iced consommé, and a thick meat stew redolent of herbs and wine. Joanna ate more than she would have believed possible, considering that she felt every bite might choke her, but she firmly refused the cherry gâteau which was offered to her as a sweet, explaining glibly that she needed to watch her figure.



- Josef was inclined to pooh-pooh the excuse.
- 'The *signorina* could do with a little weight,' he said running an admonitory eye over her slender contours. 'In my country we like our women to be well rounded.'
- 'Where is your country, Josef?' Joanna asked, remembering that in one of their earliest exchanges he had told her he was not Italian.
- The neat, dark features became oddly sorrowful for a moment. 'I have no country now, *signorina*,' he replied quietly. 'But my home is with the *signore*.'
- Joanna looked down at the tray, suddenly unwilling to probe further.
- 'Is—is Signorina Fallone—well rounded?' she asked, trying to give the conversation a different turn and immediately regretting it.
- 'The Signorina Fallone?' Josef's eyes took on a distinct twinkle, so her ploy had worked to some extent. 'She has the body of a Venus,' he admitted candidly. 'But that is now. What she will be like when ten years have passed - is in the hands of the good God.' And he went off chuckling, apparently at the future prospect of the Signorina as a plump Italian matron.
- Joanna sighed as she took two of the tablets he had brought for her headache. The sky outside the window had a leaden look, interspersed with jagged flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder was getting louder all the time. She would be glad when the full force of the storm broke and perhaps her headache would improve. She took a cool shower and went to bed, hoping the tablets would help her sleep in spite of the storm.
- She awoke with a start to find the room suddenly lit up as if by technicolor and a noise above her head which suggested the entire roof of the *palazzo* was collapsing inwards. No need to wonder what had woken her, she thought exasperatedly. She could hear a steady splashing and realised with annoyance that she had left the shutters open when she fell asleep and that rain was splashing in on to the bedroom floor through the iron grille across the open window.
- She got out of bed and tiptoed across to fasten the heavy shutters, avoiding the slight puddles that had already formed. The storm seemed to be directly overhead and the lightning was so intense that she could manage her task without having to switch on the electric light. She was reluctant to use the light anyway, in case the storm had somehow affected the current.
- The shutters in place, she felt her way back to the dressing chest and reached into the top drawer for the torch which had come with the rest of her things from the *Luana*.
- She would go to the bathroom, she thought, and fetch a towel to mop up the water on the floor. She let herself out into the passage and stood listening for a moment. The luminous dial on her wristwatch revealed that it was past two o'clock in the morning, so Josef's tablets had given her a reasonable rest. The only trouble was, she was now wide awake and apparently the only person in the *palazzo* who was. No one else seemed to be stirring at all in spite of the violence of the storm. They must either have nerves of steel or ear-plugs, Joanna thought as a particularly reverberating crash seemed to make the whole building shake.
- She had completed her mopping up operations and returned the damp towel to the bathroom

when a thought occurred to her. If she was the only person awake, this was her ideal opportunity to have a look round the *palazzo* without Nick's overseeing eye observing her every move. She might even get into Leo Vargas' study and recover her passport and other papers which were still in his possession. She hesitated, aware that she still had no means of getting off the island even if she did find her passport, then squared her shoulders resolutely. At least it would be a step towards regaining her freedom.

- It was a move she needed to make for her own self-respect.
- She slipped back into her room and put on the peignoir which matched her midnight blue chiffon nightdress, then crept in bare feet down the dark corridor towards the main gallery.
- She stood at the head of the stairs and listened intently. The lightning flickered intermittently through the windows below her, making the shadows dance and recede. Although she could hear nothing but the storm, she had the curious sensation that somewhere close at hand she was being watched. She shivered slightly and drew the peignoir closer around her as she began her descent of the stairs. There couldn't be anyone there, she told herself reassuringly, or she would have been certain to have been challenged and sent back to her room. Nevertheless the feeling persisted as she reached the great hall and looked back up towards the gallery.
- She half ran across the hall to the door of Leo Vargas' study. It was unlocked and the ornate handle twisted easily under the pressure of her fingers. She crept into the room and closed the door behind her, leaning against it for a moment as she assessed her surroundings. She could hardly believe the comparatively short period of time that had elapsed since she woke up behind the screen in the corner and saw Leo Vargas sitting at his desk, yet in that time her life seemed to have changed completely. She thought sadly and with a certain detachment of that girl she had been, so sure of herself and her place in the scheme of things. Now she was sure of nothing.
- She walked across to the desk and hesitated at the array of drawers with which she was confronted. She might as well be methodical, she thought, and began on the left-hand side, working her way downwards. The contents seemed disappointingly ordinary. There was nothing to give her any clue about whom or what the Vorghese cousins were concealing in the hidden area of the *palazzo*, but she hadn't expected to find anything. But nor was there any sign of her passport. She bit her lip in vexation and began on the other side of the desk, trying not to disarrange the neat piles of business papers and folders that the drawers contained. But her search was fruitless. Even the dossier he had prepared on her was nowhere to be found. She closed the last drawer with a sigh and stared around her, sending the increasingly feeble light from her torch playing over the closely packed shelves of books.
- It was far more the room of a dedicated business man who found his recreation in reading than that of a master criminal, Joanna thought, her mind unwillingly creating the arresting, virile image of the man whose refuge this was. It was such a totally masculine environment with not one concession made to the luxury found elsewhere in the *palazzo*, as if its owner was determined to stamp his own very individual personality on this one area at least.
- Suddenly Joanna wanted the comfort and security of her own room again. She went out into the hall and made for the staircase, but halfway up she hesitated again. At the other end of the gallery in that maze of passages was the door which had been locked when Nick took her on their tour. This might be the best opportunity she would ever have to find out if it was still mysteriously locked, and if not, what lay behind it.

- She swallowed nervously, recognising the hazards involved. What if there really was a gang of dangerous men hiding there? Even a little knowledge could be a dangerous thing under such circumstances and she had to realise the fact that total knowledge could be fatal. Her safest move would be to go back to her room and try to sleep.
- Determinedly she turned her back on the gallery leading to her part of the house and plunged down the opposite corridor. If she was ever to convince the authorities that Leo Vargas had broken the law, then she would need proof, whatever risk might be involved in obtaining it.
- She caught her breath uneasily as she realised she would have to pass the door of his own suite to reach the passage in question, but all remained silent as she moved stealthily past on her bare feet and reached the archway covered by the crimson velvet curtain. The thunder crackled ominously as she drew back the curtain and peered down the short passage, at the end of which was the door, still inimically shut. It was like a warning, she thought, suppressing the nervous giggle that rose in her throat, and then the torch flickered and went out. She stood quite still in the darkness for a moment, waiting for the next lightning flash to give her her bearings. She felt her way down the wall to the door and groped for the handle. But the latch would not budge even when she pushed her entire weight against it.
- Another wild goose chase, she thought despondently, as she emerged into the main corridor and let the curtain fall back into place behind her. There was nothing for it but to go back to bed.
- She wished her torch was still working as the shadows ahead of her shifted and diffused. One of them seemed more solid than the others, and again she experienced the uncanny sensation of being watched by unseen eyes.
- From the darkness, below the rumble of the thunder and separate from it, came the low-throated snarl of an animal. The solid shadow detached itself and came forward, and Joanna's heart leaped into her throat. A dog, she thought. It's only a dog.
- Her knees felt suddenly weak and she leaned against the wall, waiting for the thudding of her pulses to calm. She held out a shaking hand, whispering, 'Here, boy!'
- But the dog did not respond. He stood his ground and that low, unearthly snarl brought the hair rising on the nape of her neck.
- 'Here, boy! Good dog/,'she whispered again, puzzled. She had been used to dogs all her life, liked them and was accustomed to their friendship in return.
- The corridor was suddenly alight with the strange brilliance of the storm, and she knew then why the animal had not come to her. It was not a type she had ever previously encountered who stood a few paces from her, his ears laid back and his lip rising from his fangs in another of those blood-chilling snarls. It was a breed she had rarely ever seen before, except in television newsreel pictures of incidents where people had been savaged by guard dogs.
- The thunder crashed over the house, but it was nothing to the noise of her own racing heart. She crouched back motionless against the wall, one hand protectively at her throat, the other gripping the useless torch, her only means of defence if—when the dog sprang. Had those red, savage eyes been those she had sensed were watching her as she went downstairs? The dog must have tracked every yard of her progress since she had left her room, she thought unsteadily, and now it had her cornered and was moving in to the attack.

- The lightning flickered again and Joanna saw the dog's muscles bunching as it prepared to spring. She screamed then, helpless with terror as the darkness came thundering back and she waited for the impact of harsh fur and bone and muscle against her flesh.
- But even as her own cry died in her ears, she felt the solid mass of the wall behind her moving—giving way, and someone was gripping her shoulders, dragging her backwards away from the terror that waited in the darkness into a light that dazzled her eyes.

## • CHAPTER SEVEN



- She was thrust down into the softness of a fur rug, pushing herself up on to her hands and staring through the tangle of her hair in time to see Leo Vargas pushing the door shut with his shoulder. And only just in time. From the other side came a thud and a howl of pain, followed by a crescendo of hysterical barking.
- He stayed where he was for a moment, his eyes closed. He was pale under his tan which threw into prominence the high cheekbones and the proud lines of his nose and mouth. Except for a pair of white silk pyjama trousers, he was naked, and Joanna could see a faint film of sweat glistening on the broad chest and shoulders.
- She began to laugh suddenly, a wild harsh sound that bubbled up from deep inside her, hurting her throat.
- 'You're afraid,' she choked. 'But you can't be afraid. The Lion of Saracina can't be afraid of—a—mere dog.'
- The heavy lids snapped open to reveal the blaze of anger in his eyes. He reached her in a stride, and she felt the sting of his palm across her cheek, stemming the floodtide of hysteria which threatened to overwhelm her. Her eyes stung and the room swung round her in a blur of light and colour.
- He lifted her in his arms as if she were a child and carried her across the room and through a curtained doorway. Her cheek was pressed against the bare warmth of his flesh and she knew an insane urge to turn her head and put her lips against his body. But she mustn't do that, she knew, with the agony of tears in her throat. He had already decided not to risk an involvement with her and she must never let him know she even knew of his decision, let alone had been hurt by it.
- She was placed without gentleness on the soft and yielding surface of a bed which was the room's main piece of furniture, four-posted and hung with rich tapestry curtains embroidered in muted shades.
- 'Stay there,' he said curtly, then disappeared back through the doorway into the outer room. Presently she heard voices, a strange man's talking loudly and nervously in a long stream of words, across which Leo Vargas' cold incisive interruption cut like a knife.
- Joanna lay quietly. She was still shaken by the events of the past few minutes, and she thought

the dog's eyes glittering at her as it prepared to leap at her throat would haunt her nightmares until the day she died. Almost unconsciously she huddled further into the pillow, seeking comfort from the fact that she now occupied the slight hollow in the bed that his body had made. Interspersed with the clean sharp smell of the linen was the tang of the cologne he wore, and she lifted a fold of the sheet, holding it against her face, inhaling the fragrance which seemed so entirely his.

- The voices in the other room had sunk to a murmur and it was easier not to strain her ears to hear what they were saying, even if she could have understood. After the tension she had suffered, it was heaven to be able to relax like this. She sighed, curling her toes into the covers, as she heard the sound of the outer door closing.
- Without even glancing at the doorway, she knew that Leo had re-entered the room and she moistened her lips nervously with the tip of her tongue as she waited for him to speak.
- 'I am waiting for your explanation.' He sounded as remote as the Alps and as icy.
- 'Explanation?' she echoed lamely. 'I don't know what you mean.'
- 'Then you are either a liar, Signorina Leighton, or incredibly naive. But perhaps I have not made myself sufficiently clear. Why were you trying to get into the locked room at the end of the corridor opposite? Oh, don't try to pretend.' He lifted a hand in warning as she began to protest. 'I know you were there, because anyone touching that door is picked up by an electronic device which sounds an alarm both in this room and in the security area downstairs.'
- He watched the betraying colour come up in her face and laughed sardonically. 'You should be grateful for the device, *signorina*. It may well have saved your life. I was just opening the door when I heard you scream. I could well have been too late.' His voice deepened angrily. 'You little fool! What other dangers will your eternal curiosity lead you into before you are content? That dog could have killed you—you realise that?'
- 'Perhaps so,' she cried, almost hysterically. 'But what right have you to allow killer dogs to roam at will through the *palazzo* at night? I admit I was in the wrong by even being near these rooms, but I think you should have warned me when you left my door unlocked that there were dogs loose. You might have known I would try to find out what was in that room sooner or later.'
- 'The dogs are not merely set loose, you stupid child. They usually patrol the grounds with their handlers. But tonight this dog was indoors because thunder disturbs him, and he had slipped away from his handler. The man has just been giving me his explanation,' he added grimly.
- Joanna moistened her lips. 'Did he—did he get into trouble? I mean, you haven't dismissed him or anything because of me...'
- He sighed impatiently. 'What a mass of contradictions you are, screaming at me one moment because your life has been in danger and next minute pleading for the well-being of the man who was responsible for placing you at risk. No, he has not been dismissed, but that dog will never leave its chain again while it remains on the island.'
- He looked down at her and his face darkened again. 'I am still waiting for an answer, Joanna. What precisely were you doing in that passage?'
- She felt herself beginning to shake and her stomach suffered a sharp stab of nausea.

- 'Oh, please,' she whispered. 'I think I'm going to be sick.'
- 'Lie still.' He turned and went rapidly into the other room, returning with a glass containing a pale amber liquid. 'Drink this,' he commanded sharply. 'It's only brandy,' he added as she hesitated. 'I am descended from the Vorghese,*signorina*, not the Borgias.'
- She sipped the spirit, gasping a little as it caught the back of her throat, feeling its reviving warmth spreading through her veins, taking away the chill and the sickness.
- 'I'm sorry,' she managed eventually.
- 'I don't doubt it. Being found out is always an unpleasant business, quite apart from the shock you have suffered. I regret I have to question you, but I must know what you hoped to find in that room?'
- 'The answer to a riddle,' she said rather drearily, swirling the remains of the brandy in the bottom of the glass.
- 'You risk your life for a riddle.*Perché* ?'
- 'Because I thought the answer would help me put you in jail,' she flung at him, the brandy aiding her defiance.
- The tawny eyes went over her, arrogant as those of a great cat.
- 'I did not realise you were so set upon revenging yourself,' he said coolly, after a pause.
- 'It's not a question of revenge,' she defended herself. 'I've never knowingly helped anyone break the law yet, and I just can't do it, no matter what... ' She stopped abruptly, the colour flaring in her cheeks as she realised she had been about to say: 'No matter what I feel about you.'
- 'You were saying?' He was watching her, his eyebrows raised.
- 'No matter What the circumstances might be,' she said with an assumption of calmness.
- 'Do you never feel, Joanna, that humanity sometimes deserves new laws?' he asked quietly.
- 'Perhaps,' she looked down, unwilling to meet his gaze, her fingers nervously pleating the dark blue chiffon. 'But I'm not sufficiently arrogant to think that I might make them.'
- 'Maybe it is not arrogance that is needed, but simply a generous and a loving heart. Would you not claim that much at least for yourself?'
- She kept her eyes lowered, frightened of what he might see in them. If he wanted evidence that she was capable of loving, then it was there.
- The long silence that followed was interrupted eventually by his swift sigh, impatient and slightly bitter.
- When he spoke his voice was cold again. 'There is a secret in the *palazzo's* keeping,*signorina*,



as you have been aware, but it is not my secret and I am not at liberty to disclose it to you. But if you hope to convict me of some crime, you are doomed to disappointment. Neither myself nor any member of my family have broken any law for which we could be convicted.

- 'If you truly thought that we had then I am afraid you were merely indulging your own resentment. Can you honestly say that you gave a moment's credence to my having jeopardised my business enterprises, my dependants, apart from my name and the honour of my family, by committing some meaningless crime?'
- He pushed his hand across his eyes as if he was weary.
- 'What did you suspect me of, I wonder? Embezzlement—forgery, or merely robbing widows and orphans? You are angry because I have kept you here against your will. What you do not yet understand is that I had no alternative. Once you were here, here you had to remain.
- 'I would give you my word this is so, but there is little point if you are still determined to regard me as a criminal.'
- Joanna flinched a little at the bitterness in his words. She was aware of a blazing relief at his words, but to have betrayed it openly would be too blatant a confession of her feelings for him, she realised unhappily. Instead she said in a low voice, 'You have every right to be angry. I—I didn't want to believe that you were covering up a crime, but it seemed the only feasible explanation for what was going on. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused. Coming to the island in the first place was an impertinence. I see that now. All I want now is to go right away and forget any of this ever happened.'
- 'It isn't as easy as that,' he answered shortly. 'I still can't permit you to leave. But you can console yourself that your imprisonment may only continue for a matter of a few hours longer.'
- She wanted to tell him that it was no great consolation, but pride kept the words sealed in her throat. She could not help a little sigh as she pulled her peignoir more closely around her as she prepared to get up.
- 'The—the storm seems to have passed over, doesn't it? I think I had better go back to my room,' she said. 'Thank you for helping me—and I'm sorry I disturbed your night's rest.'
- 'It isn't for the first time,' he said drily, and she felt that betraying blush warm her cheeks again. 'And you must stop apologising, Joanna. I don't care for this new humility. It's out of character, *mia*.'
- Stung, she gave him a sudden glare, searching vainly for a retort that would put him down once and for all, and was nonplussed to see that mockery had replaced the sombre look in his eyes.
- 'That's better,' he told her impossibly. He put out his hand to help her to her feet, as she swung her legs to the floor, and his fingers tightened on the soft flesh of her arm.
- Dry-throated, she said, 'I must go.'
- 'Must you?' His hand slid up her arm, inside the full sleeve in the lightest of caresses to her shoulder. 'Perhaps it would be better for us both if you stayed.'

- She made herself look up and meet his glance and felt that treacherous weakness sweeping through her body. She was acutely aware of how late it was and how completely alone they were, and was tremblingly conscious of her own vulnerability.
- She watched his face as he leaned towards her and thought with a kind of dreamy wonder how short a time she had known him and yet how every plane and angle of his face was etched inexorably on her inner being and had been and would be for all eternity.
- He did not seize her in punishing hands or pin her against the bed. He simply bent and let his lips brush hers in a slow teasing caress that promised and yet held at bay at the same time, until at last with a little protesting murmur, she fastened her hands compulsively at the back of his neck, pulling him down to her.
- There was no gentleness then in the mouth that parted hers and she welcomed his fierceness, pressing her body against the length of his, glorying in her ability to rouse him.
- He kissed her throat, finding the tumultuous pulse that throbbed just below her delicate jawline, before his lips traced a totally sensuous path down to the point where her peignoir fastened at the neck in a soft chiffon bow. The soft fabric seemed to whisper through his hands as he pulled it undone and slid the fragile garment from her shoulders. Then he bent, lifting her into his arms as if she was a child, holding her against his heart. For a long moment he looked down at her, then almost hungrily his lips found the hollow between her breasts. His thick burnished hair was like silk under her trembling fingers. She was suddenly shy of him, of his probing gaze in this brightly lit room, of his lips which were sending little tongues of flame flickering along her nerve endings in a devastating siege of her will.
- He placed her gently on the bed and lay beside her, his hand cupping her face.
- 'Stay with me, *mia* .' His voice was huskier than she had ever heard it. 'At least we need have no secrets from each other.'
- No secrets, she thought despairingly, when she already guarded a secret she could never tell him—that she loved him, and without his love in return even the sharing of passion would be a hollow thing, without substance or meaning.
- With a little moan, she turned away from him, dragging her arm across suddenly wet eyes. He bent over her.
- '*Carissima*, what is it? Are you frightened? There is no need. I'll be gentle with you, I swear it. Or do you still not trust me?'
- 'It's not a question of trust,' she forced from her tightening throat. 'I—I just don't like being used.'
- She felt the arm that held her grow suddenly rigid and knew without having to face him that he was frowning.
- 'And how precisely are you being used?'
- 'Well, what else do you call it?' she cried. 'You said yourself only a minute ago that I might only be here for a few hours longer. Is that why you're making love to me? Because it's safe now that I'll be leaving soon and won't be here to make a—nuisance of myself by making too many

demands on you?' She almost choked on the final words.

- Again his hand cupped her face, forcing her to look at him, but this time there was no tenderness in his touch, and she shrank from the anger that blazed at her from his eyes.
- '*Dio*, what an opinion you have of me,' he said too softly.
- 'It's true, isn't it?' she demanded. 'Admit it. Admit that you didn't want to get involved with me. That was one of the reasons you brought Nick here, wasn't it? To keep me away from you—to make sure that you wouldn't be—tempted to do something you might regret later.'
- 'If that was the plan,' he drawled, 'you will agree that it has been remarkably unsuccessful. Yes, what you say is partly true. Of course I wanted you. I would not have been human otherwise—and it is true that the timing was inconvenient, but—'
- 'And now it is convenient, I suppose. Perhaps I should be flattered—like the island girls who used to flock to your illustrious ancestor.' She almost spat the words at him. 'I wonder how he used to dispose of his discarded mistresses when their night of passion was over, and they became an embarrassment to him. He didn't have a helicopter service standing by to remove them. Perhaps they went over the cliff instead.'
- 'It is a solution that has much to recommend it,' he said tightly. He flung himself off the bed, reaching for a towelling bathrobe that lay across a nearby chair. He saw the startled look in her tear-bright eyes and laughed, sardonically without humour.
- 'Don't be afraid, *cara*. Your night of passion, as you phrase it, is at an end. I won't degrade you by my attentions any further. Anyway, it was a woman I wanted in my arms, not a hysterical child. Can you find your own way back to your room, or shall I ring for Josef to escort you?'
- 'No—oh, no.' She was shaking so much she could hardly fasten her peignoir. 'He might think...'
- 'Yes, he might, mightn't he?' he mocked her. 'And that would never do, *cara*, would it, for the English rose who intends to leave my island as innocent as she was when she came here. What is it, *bella mia*? Are you afraid that Nick wouldn't want my leavings? You are wrong. He would prize Sir Bernard Leighton's daughter, even at second hand.'
- She was shocked into silence by the studied cruelty of the words he had hurled at her. With a little involuntary sob, she turned and headed for the door, running blindly into the corridor, seeking her room on a purely instinctive level like a small animal fleeing from a predator.
- She hurled herself across her bed, weeping without restraint. Now, when she left Saracina, all she would take with her was the memory of his bitterness and hostility. The preservation of her ideals and self-respect seemed little recompense in comparison.
- When at last she slept, it was the sleep of exhaustion, worn out by tears. She awoke to find it was late in the afternoon. The room was full of sunlight with no trace of the storm of the previous night except an extra freshness in the air. Joanna struggled up unwillingly on to her elbow, pushing her hair out of her eyes, blinking a little in the strong light.
- There was a figure standing at the foot of the bed and for a moment, still fogged with sleep, she

thought it was Josef. Then, almost incredulously, she heard a woman's soft voice say, '*Buon giorno, signorina. Posso aiutarla ?*'

- Joanna sat up, staring at the dark-clad woman who faced her smilingly.
- '*Si, vorrei un caffè con panna, prego,*' she managed. Then, '*Scusi, parla l'inglese?* Do you speak English?'
- '*Un poco, signorina.*' The woman smiled again, revealing very white teeth. 'A very little. I am Maria to wait on the *signorina*.'
- 'I—I see,' Joanna stared at her, biting her lip. 'I'm sorry, Maria,' she added hastily, noticing that the woman was growing embarrassed. 'I'm just surprised to see you, that's all.'
- Maria gave her a slightly puzzled smile and went away, presumably to fetch coffee and cream. Joanna found a pair of jeans and a sleeveless top and showered and dressed rapidly. When she returned to her room, the more familiar figure of Josef was waiting for her and the tray of coffee had been set on the table near the window.
- 'So it was a mirage,' Joanna commented, picking up the coffee pot and pouring herself a cup.
- '*Signorina?*'
- 'Don't play games with me, Josef. Have the women servants come back to the *palazzo* ?'
- '*Si, signorina.* This morning, they have returned after their *fiesta* .'
- Joanna gave him a long, hard look. His face was as impassive as ever, but she was conscious of a strange air of suppressed excitement about the little man.
- 'Your wife has returned too?' she asked.
- 'Me, *signorina* ? I am not married,' Josef sounded almost shocked.
- 'Only to the Vorghese family,' Joanna muttered, and shook her head at his inquiring look. 'It's all right, Josef. It—it wasn't important. But why have the women returned, and so suddenly?'
- Josef's face became more wooden than ever. 'It is not for me to say, *signorina* . It is for the *signore* to tell you.'
- 'I think that's hardly likely.'
- 'On the contrary, *signorina* , he is waiting for you in his study. But he gave orders that you should be allowed to sleep for as long as you wanted.'
- She flushed a little, wondering if she deserved such apparent thoughtfulness.
- 'Thank you, Josef,' she said quietly. 'I'll go down as soon as I've had my coffee.'
- Her heart was beating unpleasantly hard as she descended the stairs some time later. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked, loudly, harshly, then was silent, and Joanna shivered as

she remembered the events of the previous night and what they might have led to in that storm-washed corridor upstairs. Her hand was still trembling in spite of herself as she knocked and heard Leo Vargas say '*Avanti*' on a note of impatience.

- He was sitting at the desk as he had been the first time she saw him, but this time the sun came slanting through the windows sending the dust motes whirling in its rays.
- Feeling rather helpless, Joanna advanced until she was standing on the other side of the desk. She moistened her lips.
- 'You wanted to speak to me?' She was glad her voice betrayed none of her nervousness. He glanced at her as he might have looked at a stranger.
- '*Si*. These are yours, I believe.' Across the polished surface of the desk, he tossed her passport, bank card and the other papers she had searched for so vainly the previous night.
- 'I don't quite understand.' She picked them up, frowning a little.
- 'What is there to understand?' he asked coldly. 'They belong to you. I am returning them. I should have thought you would have been glad to have them back.'
- 'Then I am free to leave?' She gazed at him questioningly, unable to recognise in this taut, hard-eyed stranger either the man who had brought her almost to the point of surrender, or who had driven her away with his insults.
- He hesitated. 'There is a slight problem with transport at the moment. When that is—resolved, you may leave whenever you wish.'
- 'I see,' Joanna said slowly. He had picked up a file from his desk and was making notes on a margin of one of the papers it contained. She had apparently been dismissed.
- She moved closer to the desk and leaned forward slightly, resting her weight on her hands.
- 'Josef—I mean—I thought you might want to tell me what has happened.' She saw that he had stopped writing as she spoke and hurried on, 'I know the women are back—and now you tell me I can go whenever I wish. It's obvious everything has changed since yesterday, and I'm wondering why. I know I'm being curious again,' she added with a slight flush, 'but I don't think I can altogether be blamed under the circumstances.'
- He leaned back in his chair, looking up at her, his tawny eyes as hooded and enigmatic as they had been at their first encounter.
- 'Yes, everything has changed since yesterday,' he said meditatively, and she was hotly aware that he meant more than the obvious alterations in the situation. 'There is no longer any real reason why you should not know —everything.'
- He picked up a newspaper that lay on the desk beside him and tossed it towards her, folded to reveal a front page story with blazing headlines. Joanna looked at it and the accompanying photograph in some bewilderment. The face in the picture was oddly familiar, but she was unable to identify it until Leo Vargas began, almost idly, to whistle a tune. Then she remembered—it was the Easter Hymn and the picture was of the little man she had surprised whistling it below her

room. The newspaper story itself was in Italian and hers was not good enough to be able to translate it, so she replaced it on the desk with a shake of her head and an inquiring look. As she did so, she noticed the date on the newspaper. It was an old one, dating from several days before she had arrived with Tony and the others aboard *Luana* in Calista.

- 'His name,' Leo Vargas said quietly, 'is Georgiou Damaryk. His place of birth need not concern us, but up to the date on that paper he was officially a citizen of the Soviet Union, working as a top level scientist. He was highly placed and correspondingly trusted, so much so that he was permitted to attend a recent conference with colleagues from all over Europe and America in Venice.'
- 'The—defector?' Hazily Joanna recalled the other story that had been featured In the paper Tony had brought her. The story she had completely forgotten when she had convinced herself that Leo Vargas was somehow involved in a major robbery.
- 'So you did know.' He looked at her grimly. 'Now do you see why you could not be permitted to leave here with that information?'
- 'But I didn't know he was here. How could I?' she cried. 'That wasn't why I came.'
- 'Oh, I absolve you of that,' he said coldly. 'You came here simply because it was forbidden. Damaryk came for refuge—a frightened man looking for political asylum who was terrified that he might be killed before he could hand over the information he had brought with him as a passport.'
- 'Killed?' Joanna stared at him, her lips parted.
- 'Why not? What better way of ensuring his silence? When it was arranged that he should come here, the authorities with whom we were in contact in Britain and America made it clear that political assassination was a definite possibility. That, or an attempt to kidnap him before he could pass on his information. Our best hope was secrecy, but there was always a chance that he might have been traced here—so, the security screen.'
- 'Which I breached.'
- 'As you say. And now you know why you could not be allowed to leave—for your own safety as well as Damaryk's. Even if you had known nothing, you might still have been a target for Damaryk's former masters if they had trailed him here.'
- She looked at him uncertainly. 'Yet you evacuated all the other women...'
- 'Before Damaryk arrived. And it was not so unusual as you seem to think. Many of them have relatives on the mainland, and it is not the first time a large group has enjoyed *afesta* at my expense.'
- 'And now it's all over?'
- 'Si. His de-briefing has been long and involved, but it has ended at last. He left here at dawn with his interrogators and will fly on to his new life in the States later today.'
- 'But I still don't understand,' Joanna said. 'Why did he come here of all places?'



- Leo Vargas looked past her to the door. 'Tell her, Josef,' he said.
- Joanna turned in surprise and saw the little man waiting by the door.
- 'He was my uncle, *signorina* ,' Josef said quietly. 'I was fortunate enough to escape all those years ago when our country was overrun, and the Prince Vorghese, the *signore's* father, found me in a refugee camp and looked after me. My uncle Georgiou was the most brilliant member of our family. Him they took, and he worked for them.' He paused, his voice thickened a little by emotion.
- 'I never thought I would see him again, and then a year ago I received a letter from him—such an ordinary letter, talking of the old days and asking if I would reply. We began a correspondence, knowing of course that every letter was being censored. Then—this letter arrived. For a moment I thought he had gone mad. He talked of people that never existed, recalled events that had never happened. Then I realised.' He smiled. 'When I was a small boy, he used to write to me then from the University and sometimes for a joke he would invent a code and use that. It was our secret, he would say.'
- 'The letter was in that code?' Joanna asked slowly.
- '*Si, signorina*. When I deciphered it, I found it was simply a cry for help. He knew there was a chance he might attend the Venice conference and that this might be his opportunity at last to get to the West.'
- This time he almost beamed. 'I knew the *signore* would help me. He agreed that my uncle should take refuge here for a while, and that while he was here on Saracina a state of martial law should exist. My uncle was very much afraid of what might happen to him if he was traced. He was—very valuable, *signorina* .'
- 'And now he's safe?'
- Josef made the sign of the cross. 'I pray so, *signorina* .'
- 'I hope so too, Josef,' Joanna said gently. She had been gripping her passport so tightly that the corner had cut into her hand, leaving a mark. She forced herself to relax, to speak with a lightness she was far from feeling.
- 'Well, all's well that ends well. I'm very glad for you, Josef. I realise now why you couldn't answer my questions. I must have been a great nuisance to you.'
- 'Ah no, *signorina* .' Josef smiled at her warmly. 'You have never been that.'
- 'I think you're being kinder than I deserve.' Joanna bit her lip. 'I hope your uncle will enjoy his new life. I'm sorry I startled him so the other evening.'
- Josef's smile grew even wider. 'He told me, *signorina* , the shock had been worth it to catch a glimpse of such beauty.' He made her a slight bow and went out. Joanna felt her cheeks grow scarlet and she sent a fleeting, embarrassed look at Leo Vargas, who had turned away and appeared to be studying something on his desk with deep attention.

- 'If the secret is out, then I suppose there is nothing to keep me here any longer,' she said at last. 'I'd better go and pack my things. Is Nick around? I'd like to say goodbye to him before I leave.'
- 'No. He too flew out on one of the helicopters this morning. He has gone to the mainland to meet a guest for me, but he will be back in time for dinner. You are not planning to leave before then?'
- The sarcastic note in his voice flicked her on the raw, but she refused to be provoked. She was leaving soon, she thought miserably. She would leave with what dignity there was left to her.
- 'I imagine not,' she replied quietly. 'After all, I am dependent on you for my transport, am I not?'
- He bowed ironically. 'I should not be in too great a hurry to pack if I were you,' he tossed after her, as she moved to the door. 'Perhaps when you meet my new guest you will decide you prefer to stay on for a while.'
- Joanna turned to face him, her eyes blazing in her pale face. 'Believe me, *signore*, all I'm living for is the moment I can get off this island and away from you. I shan't stay here a moment longer than necessary, I assure you.'
- '*Benissimo*.' His eyes skimmed her dismissively as he returned to the carved chair behind the desk.
- As she reached the door, she remembered something. She indicated her passport.
- 'As a matter of interest, *signore*, where was it?'
- 'Why do you ask?'
- She shrugged. 'Oh, merely because I could see no sign of it when I went through your desk last night.'
- She waited almost expectantly for the explosion, but it did not come.
- When he spoke, his voice was soft and very deliberate.
- 'Be thankful, *signorina*, that I shall permit you to leave Saracina without administering the thrashing you so richly deserve.'
- Joanna fled.
- Her plans to begin packing immediately were thwarted when she reached her room, only to find it was in the process of being cleaned by Maria and two other women. Joanna decided ruefully that it would be unfair to interfere with their work, which had already been held up that day because of her. She tried haltingly to exchange a few words of conversation with them, but their quick rush of smiling Italian was too much for her and she had to admit defeat.
- As she looked round vaguely for a bathing towel, having decided to spend a little time by the swimming pool, she saw that Maria had picked up her discarded chiffon nightdress and peignoir from the floor and was smoothing the crumpled folds with a reverent hand.

- 'Bella,' she murmured admiringly, displaying it to the other women.
- Joanna's throat felt suddenly constricted. She was unbearably reminded of the look in Leo Vargas' eyes as she lay in his arms—could it only have been a few hours before? It seemed a lifetime away, if it had ever happened at all. She gave an involuntary shiver at the searing memory of his lips and hands on her skin. It was useless to tell herself that she would only have been left with regrets if she had given herself to him as he had wanted. At least she would not have had to suffer this feeling of utter emptiness and sterility.
- She turned abruptly to Maria. 'Prendetela. Please take it,' she said, firmly silencing the immediate voluble protests that the gown was too fine, too delicate and above all too expensive for Maria to accept. 'Per favore, Maria. Please, you would be doing me—a favour.'
- As she looked back from the door, she saw that Maria was holding the nightgown up in front of herself at the mirror, with a look of awe, while her companions, to judge from their ribald giggles, were gauging her husband's probable reaction to the garment. Joanna allowed herself a brief, unhappy smile before she went downstairs and out into the open air.
- The swim refreshed her, but it could not drive the ache from her heart or the prevailing feeling of lassitude from her limbs. She pulled herself up out of the water and towelled herself briskly, then sat down on the tessellated edge of the pool, reaching in her bag for a comb. As she pulled and coaxed the tangles out of her hair, she remembered that first afternoon when she had sat on a rock on the deserted beach pretending she was a mermaid. She had been happy then, she thought, with a new certainty of what she wanted from her life. Now she was no longer sure of anything except that somehow she had to pick up the pieces and go on. She still had her plans to become a model which should provide her with sufficient hard work over the next months to prevent her from constantly torturing herself with useless recriminations.
- After all, it was so simple really. She had allowed herself to fall in love with a man who had shown her quite clearly that his interest in her was physical and not emotional. It was a situation which had happened to thousands of girls in the past and would undoubtedly continue to happen in the future to thousands more. She could rationalise the whole thing quite easily. What she could not do was stop it hurting.
- She tugged the comb through a particularly vicious tangle and told herself resolutely that it was the pain from that which had caused the dancing water, the sun and the flowers to coalesce into one shimmering blur. She did not know when she realised she was no longer alone. Perhaps it was the faint noise from the elegant wrought iron gate which led to the rest of the grounds which attracted her attention, but when she lifted her head, Leo Vargas was standing on the other side of the pool watching her. She was caught, utterly defenceless, without any of the paraphernalia of sophisticated make-up or even sunglasses to hide what she was feeling from his merciless gaze. For an endless moment she had to endure his look and she braced herself automatically for his scorn, or, even worse, his amusement, closing her eyes to shut out the vision of his tall figure standing, as always, she thought drearily, completely out of her reach.
- When she opened her eyes again, puzzled by the continuing silence, she was alone, and she wondered for a crazy moment whether she had dreamed up his presence out of her own unhappiness.
- She got up and pulled her jeans and top back on over her nearly dry bikini. Then she heard it,

away in the distance—the sound of an approaching helicopter. Nick was returning and bringing guests with him and soon she would be required to join them at the dinner table in the *sala*. For the sake of her pride, she would need to do a complete rescue job on her appearance before that happened, she decided, squaring her shoulders. She thrust her feet into her sandals and began to walk back towards the house.

- The helicopter was directly overhead by now, and looking up, shading her eyes against the glare, Joanna thought she could see faces looking down at her and even someone waving. That would be Nick, she supposed. It occurred to her that she had never discovered where the helicopters landed in the grounds, not that it mattered particularly any more. She had never been out of doors when one was arriving or departing, she thought. That had usually taken place at night or early in the morning while she was still safely in her room. Now she watched, her hands pressed over her ears to reduce the noise as the helicopter began to descend over the *palazzo*. Joanna felt vaguely alarmed. It looked as if the pilot, if he wasn't careful, was going to land the wretched thing on the building itself, and as she observed the manoeuvres of his descent, she realised it was precisely what he was going to do. There was *no* landing strip in the grounds. The helicopters came and went using the extensive area of the *palazzo's* flat roof. She gave a little sigh. Another mystery solved.
- She wandered slowly through the gardens towards the terrace steps, lost in her own thoughts, trying to make plans for her imminent journey to London. She supposed she would be taken to the Italian mainland and decided her best plan was to make her way to Rome and arrange to fly back from there. Her funds were far from healthy, she realised, and she would probably need to cable her father when she got to the mainland and ask him to send her enough cash to get her home.
- She was trying to reconcile herself to this rather galling thought when she heard someone call her name and saw Nick on the terrace.
- '*Carissima!*' He almost ran down the steps to meet her, putting his hands rather possessively on her waist and kissing her. The casual embrace irked her, and she pulled away from him with a swift shake of her head and a murmured protest.
- 'Joanna.' His voice was reproachful. 'Is this kind, when I have taken such trouble on your behalf? I have never spent such a morning. I am exhausted, and now you are cold to me.'
- She gave him the faintest of smiles. 'I'm sorry, Nick. I didn't sleep too well because of the storm and...'
- He did not seem to notice her hesitation and plunged exuberantly on.
- 'So now you know everything, *Joannamia*. I wish I could have seen your face when you learned the truth. It was a pity to have to deceive you so, but you were so amusing—suspecting that Leo was a criminal.' He burst out laughing. 'That did not please him, I can tell you.'
- 'It wouldn't, of course.' Joanna felt completely wooden. 'I—I seem to have made a, complete fool of myself.' In every way, she added silently.
- 'But no, how could you have guessed? And now I have another surprise for you.'
- 'Nick,' she tried to stop him as they reached the top of the terrace steps, 'it's a bit late in the day

for surprises. 'I'm hoping to leave this evening, after dinner. Didn't your cousin tell you? I expect he means me to travel back to the mainland in the helicopter you came in.'

- 'And I am sure he doesn't,' Nick sent her a laughing look. 'You could not be so cruel as to leave now when we can really begin to enjoy ourselves? I can show you Saracina at its best at last. You haven't seen the textile factory in the town, or the ceramics workshops. You haven't been water-skiing. No, you cannot leave yet.' He seized her hand, and almost dragged her to the open french windows of the *salotto*. 'Tell her, *signore*. Tell her that you will both stay and enjoy our sunshine and our real hospitality.'
- Joanna's eyes searched the room bewilderedly. It seemed dim after the glare of the sunlight outside, but there was no mistaking the tall rather burly figure who rose awkwardly from one of the armchairs.
- Stunned surprise fought inside Joanna with an almost childish feeling of relief. She tore her hand free from Nick's and ran forward.
- 'Oh, Daddy,' she cried on a sob, 'I can't believe! Is it really you?'

## • CHAPTER EIGHT



- 'Yes, It's really me, Joanna.' Sir Bernard Leighton's voice held a touch of asperity besides affection, as he bent to kiss her.
- 'But how did you know I was here?'
- 'I've known all along exactly where you've been,' her father returned grimly. 'Leo cabled me as soon as you arrived here and explained that he was forced to detain you because you might be at risk otherwise. Later he telephoned me and suggested that I should join you here for a short holiday as soon as things quietened down.'
- 'Then you knew all about Damaryk?' Joanna stared at him.
- 'No, certainly not all. But a friend at the Foreign Office had dropped a hint, and the papers at home were full of his defection, of course.' His voice changed, became a little gruffer.
- 'Now then, Joanna. What have you been up to? I was shocked and displeased to hear about your conduct from Leo. He tried to excuse you, of course, but there was no escaping the facts. Young, selfish and spoiled—a nice thing to have to accept about your only child. You were deliberately trespassing and you knew it. I'm only glad that young Tony and the others had more common sense than to join you in this escapade. It shows that at least one branch of the family has some proper feelings, even if my own daughter hasn't.'
- Joanna's cheeks had reddened under his rebuke and she was glad to see that Nick had discreetly vanished from the terrace, leaving her alone with her father.
- 'Daddy, please don't be angry with me. I know I've been a fool and I've certainly been made to

feel like one. I—I haven't exactly got off lightly over all this...'

- 'I'm sure you haven't.' Sir Bernard allowed himself a brief smile, his keen eyes observing Joanna's wan air. 'You'd never bring Leo Vargas to heel as you did young Tony, poor lad. He's taken it hard, I'm afraid, and I've had your aunt wailing at me. What could I say to defend you? You make things damned difficult when you behave like this, Joanna.'
- 'Daddy,' Joanna tugged at his arm, 'you said you'd been invited to—join me here, but we don't really have to stay, do we? It won't take me long to pack and we could leave straight after dinner...'
- 'Leave?' Her father gave her an outraged look. 'I haven't come all this way at this speed simply to turn round and fly home again! I've been looking forward to this break. I haven't seen Leo for a year or two. Knew his father well, of course.'
- 'Then will you let me go home—alone?' Joanna's grip tightened appealingly on her father's sleeve.
- 'Certainly not.' Sir Bernard gave her a look which left her in no doubt of his displeasure. 'I think it's remarkably civil of Leo to have you as his guest after all the trouble you've caused him. It's not at all what I planned when...' he stopped abruptly as if aware he had said too much.
- 'What were you going to say, Daddy?' Joanna's voice was quiet as she fixed her hazel eyes steadily on her father's embarrassed face.
- 'Well, the fact is, child, Leo had asked us to stay with him long before your unofficial descent on him. I had contacted him—I wasn't too happy about that cruise of yours and I asked Leo if he would be good enough to keep an eye open for you as you were likely to be in the area. He not only agreed but insisted that we should both be his guests when your cruise ended. I suppose he knew that Damaryk would have departed by then. I was just about to cable you, telling you to meet me in Ajaccio this week instead of returning to Cannes with the others, when you took matters into your own hands.'
- 'So you were having my progress on the trip—monitored,' Joanna said, ominously calm. It explained so much, she thought, remembering the dossier of press cuttings, including the photograph, the room that seemed to have been prepared for her, down to her favourite scent on the dressing table. And that was why Leo Vargas had so detailed a knowledge of the events in Calista.
- Sir Bernard eyed her awkwardly. 'Well, you are my only child. Naturally I was concerned about you. Four youngsters loafing round the Mediterranean in a boat. God knows what kind of mess you might have landed yourself in—and look what did happen,' he added sharply. 'You proved yourself that you couldn't be trusted to do the sensible thing.'
- He saw her bite her lip and put a heavy arm around her shoulders. 'But we'll say no more about it, eh, and just relax and enjoy ourselves. From what I can gather from his cousin, Leo has quite a house party planned over the next few weeks, and the least you can do is accept his hospitality and behave yourself. I don't want to have to apologise for you again.'
- 'I'm quite capable of apologising for myself.' Joanna's voice was quiet, but she threw her father a distinctly challenging look.



- 'Hmm.' Sir Bernard was plainly unimpressed, but he patted her cheek. 'Now run along and dress for dinner. I don't want to have to introduce a ragamuffin to the Signorina Fallone.'
- Joanna stared up at him. 'Who did you say?' she asked a little shakily.
- 'Signorina Fallone. She met us at Genoa. Charming young woman—completely feminine. Heavens, child, you look utterly washed out. I daresay all this has been a nerve-racking experience for you, even if you did rather bring it on yourself. A few days' complete relaxation will do you good. Off you go, now.'
- As she went up to her room, Joanna reflected bitterly that her father invariably treated her as if she was still in school uniform. She wondered dreadingly if he would use her recent behaviour as an excuse to exercise even more control over her when they eventually returned to London. If so, she did not think she could bear it. She knew everything he did was intended ultimately for her good, but she had forgotten how stifled and helpless he so often made her feel.
- She had an overwhelming impulse to change into yet another pair of jeans for dinner, but eventually decided against it. It was no good wasting her energy on minor confrontations when she needed to reserve it for bigger battles ahead, she told herself firmly. Instead she chose one of her favourite dresses, a full-skirted simple design in jade green cotton, low-necked and sleeveless. Eyeshadow and liner worked wonders, but could not totally outlaw the new wistfulness from her eyes, she thought, banishing the vulnerability of her mouth with the sharp clear lines of a coral lipstick.
- Josef was waiting in the hall when she went downstairs again.
- 'Thesignore asks you to join him on the terrace,signorina ,' he told her, holding thesalotto door open for her.
- Joanna took a deep breath as she walked across the room to the french windows. Her hands were clenched in the folds of her skirt, but she forced herself to appear relaxed as she moved out into the sunshine.
- She noticed Marisa Fallone at once. She was tall and her cerise silk dress flattered every inch of her voluptuous figure. She was standing very close to Leo Vargas, her hand with nails tipped in the same colour as her dress, resting intimately on his arm as she talked to him, smiling up into his face in a way that could have left no onlooker in any doubt as to their relationship.
- Joanna stood unnoticed for a moment, watching them bleakly. Nick's words came back to haunt her yet again. 'When Leo wants a woman, one comes to him, believe me.' She had never doubted it, she thought unhappily. She did not need so blatant a piece of proof.
- 'Joanna,carissima .' Nick joined her smilingly. 'Let me get you a Martini.'
- She thanked him and moved over to join her father, who was standing at the head of the steps, looking out over the grounds. He turned and gave her a smile which, although restrained, contained a fair measure of approval, and the smile broadened when Nick came over to them bringing Joanna's drink.
- Exit Tony, enter Nick, Joanna thought silently. Really, for such an astute man, her father could

be almost transparent at times I She-sipped her drink, making the little knot of irritation unwind again. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the shimmer of cerise silk and realised that Leo was bringing his companion over to them.

- 'Marisa, you haven't met Signorina Joanna Leighton.'
- Joanna shook hands and exchanged polite murmurs with the other girl, perfectly aware that she had been comprehensively summed up and dismissed by the sparkling dark eyes.
- Marisa turned to Sir Bernard, her smile revealing kittenish white teeth.
- 'Your daughter, *signore*?' Her voice had an overtly sexy timbre. 'You do not look old enough to be the father of such a big girl.'
- Joanna seethed silently. Signorina Fallone obviously believed in killing two birds with one stone, grossly flattering her father and relegating herself to the nursery. She turned away to put her glass down on a wrought iron table and saw that Leo Vargas was watching her. She thought he looked faintly amused and her chin went up, but at that moment Josef emerged on to the terrace to tell them that dinner was served.
- Marisa Fallone gave a virtuoso performance over dinner, flirting with Leo and Sir Bernard and even bestowing some crumbs of her attention on Nick. Joanna ate her food without tasting a mouthful and replied politely to any remarks that were addressed to her. When the meal was over, she excused herself and went up to her room.
- After lunch the following day, Nick volunteered to take Sir Bernard on a brief sightseeing tour of Saracina and it was taken for granted that Joanna would be accompanying them. She took her place in the car somewhat listlessly, but it was not long before she had succumbed to the island's charm. Nick kept away from the coast this time, and turned the car inland to the more mountainous region, its lower slopes covered in the muted mauve colour of *themaquis*, broken by silvery clumps of olive trees and small groves of cork oaks and pines.
- Nick pulled the car off the road and they walked and scrambled up a track that Joanna secretly suspected had been formed by a herd of drunken goats to look at the cascade which Nick had told them was one of the island's chief beauty spots.
- She had to admit it was worth the climb. The boiling, tumbling water had slashed itself a small gorge in the dark rocks and brilliantly coloured flowering plants, including the inevitable bougainvillaea, clung to whatever shallow soil had collected in the crevices in the cliffside. Looking down, they could see the water foaming over jagged stones down into the green gash of the valley beyond and the more placid waters of the small river that watered it.
- Although Sir Bernard was genuinely appreciative of the scenery, it was clear that he was more interested in going back to Saracina town itself and seeing what had been achieved in the textile and ceramics industries. Joanna sighed to herself. She would have preferred to have kept away from the vicinity of the *palazzo* for a much longer time.
- She had gone to the pool that morning, but Marisa Fallone had been there, wearing a minuscule bikini, with Leo in close attendance. Joanna made sure that her lounger was well out of earshot of their conversation and was glad to hide behind the barrier of Nick's inconsequential chat. She felt Marisa resented their presence as an intrusion and it embarrassed her. She knew that Marisa had

been planning to visit the town that afternoon to buy some ceramics, and she hoped they would not run into each other.

- Saracina itself was little more than one steep street winding its way from the *palazzo* gates at its head to the harbour at its foot. Nick parked the car at the top of the hill and they walked down over the rough cobbles. Most of the shops seemed to consist merely of a rough stall erected outside someone's house. Oranges, lemons and great bunches of grapes added colour to the more homely vegetables on display, and the smell of fish from the quayside fought with the pervading odour of garlic and olive oil.
- There were no vehicles to be seen, but plenty of patient donkeys, many of them with huge panniers strapped to their backs. Small alleyways ran between the houses to roughly paved courtyards bright with flowers where hens scratched in the dirt and lines of washing moved gently, to prove that the wives of Saracina were returning. Voices called, dogs barked and children squabbled. It seemed to Joanna that the town was waking up after a prolonged sleep.
- Nick murmured in her ear, 'There will be celebrations and dancing in Saracina tonight. The men will have been lonely without their women.'
- His voice was full of innuendo and Joanna flushed.
- Inevitably her thoughts went to the *palazzo* and its master who had also recently welcomed back his woman. Would he join in the little town's festivities, she wondered, or would his celebration be a more private one, confined to the shuttered rooms of his suite? She bit her lip, setting a curb on her imagination.
- She could only be thankful that she had been spared the humiliation of seeing herself supplanted after one night in his arms, she told herself miserably.
- She refused to accompany Sir Bernard and Nick to look over the textile factory, saying simply that she preferred to remain in the fresh air. Sir Bernard gave an incredulous sniff, and warned her not to get lost.
- 'On Saracina, *signore*?' Nick grinned. 'There is nowhere she could go. Meet us at the bar on the quay, *Joannamia*, in half an hour. We will sit in the sunshine and drink wine.'
- She could not help laughing at the comical grimace he threw her over his shoulder as he went off, almost eclipsed in her father's imposing wake.
- She wandered off down the street, pausing to inspect the attractive displays of woven raffia espadrilles and the soft hand-made leather bags. Saracina obviously had a tourist trade of sorts in normal conditions, she realised, but Leo Vargas had not allowed his people to put all their dependence on the vagaries of holiday makers. Nick had told her that most of the rugs and cloth and ceramics made on the island were exported to the mainland to satisfy the demands of the quality market.
- Ahead of her she saw what appeared to be a forest of swaying masts, and realised she was almost at the quay. There was quite a large crowd of people, mostly men, waiting at the end of the jetty and as she walked towards them she saw they were awaiting the arrival, of a large boat. She stood on the edge of the crowd, watching as ropes were thrown ashore and secured, and a rough gangway lowered. More returning wives, she thought, as a little file of women carrying

suitcases and bundles, some of them with small children, began to disembark.

- A small, tender smile touched her mouth as she watched the utterly joyful reunions taking place. Nearly everyone else in the crowd seemed to have someone who belonged to them to welcome and it all served to emphasise her own feeling of loneliness and isolation.
- Abruptly she turned away, tears pricking her eyes, only to be halted by a hand on her arm. Alarmed, she looked up to see Leo Vargas staring down at her.
- 'What are you doing here alone?' he demanded. 'I thought you had gone with Nick and your father. Have you been by yourself since lunch?'
- She shook her head. 'I'm meeting them at a bar near here in a few minutes. I'm—I'm quite all right, thank you. You don't have to bother about me.'
- 'You may no longer be my prisoner, *signorina*,' he said coldly, 'but you are still my guest. Please join us.'
- Looking past him she saw Marisa Fallone, her sleek dark head protected from the slight breeze by a scarf of the same gold colour as her dress, sitting at a table on the pavement outside a small bar.
- Joanna hung back. 'I don't want to intrude,' she began, before his hand clamped round her arm and she was marched quite inexorably towards the table.
- She arrived feeling ruffled both by the breeze and her unceremonious passage. Marisa looked up, and her eyebrows rose as she darted the younger girl a look of sheer icy displeasure.
- 'Signorina Leighton?' Her voice was equally arctic. 'I thought you were—on the beach with Nicky.'
- Joanna's eyes narrowed dangerously. 'That's tomorrow,' she replied with deceptive demureness. 'Today he's buying me a new bucket and spade.'
- 'Very amusing,' Marisa smiled mirthlessly, crossing slender legs exquisitely clad in the sheerest nylon. She looked far more suited to one of the sophisticated pavement bars of the Via Veneto than a small *trattoria* on Saracina—like an exotic lily that had bloomed by mistake in a vegetable patch, Joanna decided with an involuntary smile.
- She accepted the glass of wine Leo poured for her with a quiet word of thanks and sipped it, conscious that his eyes were on her. Marisa began to talk to him in a swift flood of Italian, but he halted her with an upraised hand.
- 'Speak English, Marisa,' he suggested. 'Otherwise Joanna will not be able to follow what we say.'
- Marisa apologised sweetly, accompanying it with a look of real venom, which told Joanna quite clearly that it had not been her intention to include her in the conversation. She was frankly relieved to see her father and Nick approaching.
- 'I see another boat has put in,' Sir Bernard began as he sat down. 'You seem to have made a

thorough job of the evacuation while you were about it, Leo.'

- He nodded. 'Here in the town it was a purely voluntary thing, of course. I could only suggest, not order or demand.'
- 'But did none of the men want to know why—what was going on?'
- Leo shrugged. 'Perhaps over the years, I have made them realise I have their best interests at heart,' he said. 'They are my people and they trust me.'
- 'You're a fortunate man.' Sir Bernard smiled approvingly. 'I wish I could have inspired similar feelings in my men when I was a young officer.'
- Leo's mouth twisted slightly. 'Maybe if they had been under your command for five hundred years, you would,' he said.
- Under cover of the general conversation that followed, Joanna stole a look at Leo Vargas. He was sitting opposite her, his eyes fixed on the dark red wine in his glass, smiling faintly as he listened to Sir Bernard's not-too-serious theories on how to apply Royal naval discipline to the Mediterranean temperament. She had once thought him cold and proud, she recalled incredulously, her eyes dwelling on the firm rather sensual lines of his mouth.
- 'Joanna.' Nick touched her arm, bringing her out of her wistful reverie. 'What is it, *cara* ? You have hardly spoken a word to me all afternoon.'
- She suppressed a little sigh as she turned to him. 'I'm sorry, Nick, I don't think I'm in the mood for social chit-chat. Will you take me back to the *palazzo* ?'
- He agreed at once, jumping up to help her to rise from her chair, making sure she had her bag and generally fussing round her in a way that immediately made them both the centre of attention, Joanna realised vexedly.
- 'Is the heat too much for you, Signorina Leighton?' Marisa Fallone inquired solicitously. 'Poor child, I would close the shutters in your room and rest on your bed before dinner if I were you.' Her tone managed to suggest that if Joanna obeyed, she might just be allowed to dine with the grown-ups after all. While she was still trying to think of a reply which would put the older woman firmly in her place without playing into her hands by being schoolgirlishly rude, Nick took her arm and hurried her away.
- 'That woman!' Joanna raged when they were out of earshot.
- Nick laughed a little indulgently. 'You must forgive her, *cara* . She wants so much to become the Princess Vorghese and she knows that time is running out for her.'
- 'Do you think that Leo—will marry her?' She forced herself to speak steadily.
- Nick shrugged. 'Who knows?' he replied vaguely. 'He must marry one day if he wants an heir, and Marisa has been his—he paused delicately—'good friend for some time. At least they would have no illusions about one another. She wants his title and his money. He would get a decorative wife who would turn a blind eye to his other—little diversions.'

- Joanna stared down at the cobbled street. 'It seems an ideal arrangement,' she managed. 'But I thought Leo— Prince Vorghese did not use his title.'
- 'No more he does, but Marisa has other ideas. She will probably have her own way of persuading him to think again if they decide to marry.'
- 'Why did you say time was running out for her?'
- 'Because in the circles in which she moves she is no longer young to be still unmarried. She needs to establish herself.'
- 'Doesn't she have a career of any kind?'
- Nick burst out laughing. 'Marisa? Can you imagine her, *card* , behind a desk or breaking her nails on a typewriter? She has a share in an interior decorating business in Rome, I believe, but she does not work there herself, merely provides the connections from among her acquaintances.'
- Joanna shook her head. It occurred to her that this was very much the kind of life her father would prefer her to lead, with no demands upon her time and energy except his, leading ultimately to a respectable marriage. Perhaps one day she might even have found herself in the same position as Marisa Fallone, she thought with a sigh, searching desperately for a husband against the competition from younger, lovelier girls.
- Nick put his arm round her. 'Why do you sigh, little one?'
- 'I was just thinking—it's not a particularly enviable situation for a woman to be in,' she replied gravely, and could have kicked herself as his friendly arm immediately become more loverlike.
- 'You need have no fears, *carissima* . You have only to say the word and we will be married as soon as you wish.'
- 'No, Nick.' She freed herself a little desperately. 'That isn't at all what I meant. Anyway, I don't want to get married—at least not for some time. I want to build a career and some sort of life for myself first.'
- 'Hm.' Nick's voice was cold and speculative. 'You are not totally convincing, *cara* . Are you sure you do not also dream of becoming the Princess Vorghese?' He looked at the stricken look in her eyes and the sudden colour flaring in her cheeks, and swore angrily under his breath. '*Dio mio*, Joanna, haven't I told you that it is useless to think of Leo in that way? Sleep with him if you must and get him out of your system, but don't fool yourself that you'll ever tame him into becoming one of your docile English husbands. He would break your heart, and then break you.'
- Joanna bent her head wretchedly. 'I think this discussion is pointless,' she said. 'Your cousin doesn't feature in any of my plans for the future, I promise you, any more than I do in his.'
- But Nick had relapsed into a sullen silence which lasted until they reached the car and during the short drive back to the *palazzo* . Joanna was quite relieved when the brief journey was over and she was able to escape to her room and be alone with her thoughts, even though they were not of the happiest.



- Nick's temper remained chilly over the next two or three days, but at least she did not have to fend off any more unwanted attempts to make love to her, Joanna thought a little guiltily.
- She spent most of her time with her father, who was in a particularly relaxed and jovial mood. She even dared broach her decision to try her luck as a photographic model on their return, and although he argued with her about the necessity to carve out a career for herself, he did not raise any of the serious opposition she had feared.
- Towards the end of the week, the party at the *palazzo* was augmented by the arrival of one of Leo's executives, Antonio Ferrante, his wife Tina and their children, attractive boy and girl twins of seventeen. Young Gino Ferrante made it flatteringly evident that Joanna was his ideal woman while his sister Lucia attached herself to Nick, so Joanna found new and cheerful company without having to be thrown too closely together with Nick, which suited her very well.
- As it was her first visit to the *palazzo*, Lucia wanted to be shown the Vorghese portrait, and at dinner that evening, she buoyantly announced her envy of Joanna.
- 'Imagine to wake in the morning with his eyes upon you,' she shuddered deliciously. 'Are you not thrilled, Joanna, to sleep in that room?'
- Remembering her original reactions to the Vorghese room and to the Lion's portrait, Joanna flushed a little, particularly when she intercepted a sardonic look from Leo Vargas. She was saved having to reply by a drawled intervention from Marisa Fallone, strikingly beautiful in a black evening gown with a very low neckline.
- 'I have often slept in that room, *piccola*. The Lion did not disturb my dreams, I assure you.' She gave an artificial little laugh.
- Lucia gazed at her solemnly. 'Perhaps Joanna is more —*romantic* than you, Signorina Fallone,' she said with all the guilelessness of the young.
- Joanna could have groaned with embarrassment, especially when she caught sight of the two bright spots of colour burning in Marisa's face. She could see Signora Ferrante desperately seeking for a new topic of conversation to cover up the awkward moment, when Leo Vargas cut in easily, speaking directly to Lucia.
- 'You have fallen in love with a legend, little one. I doubt if you would have found the reality quite so pleasant, but if it is romance you are seeking I have another Lion to show you after dinner—and another legend.'
- Joanna had intended to remain behind in the *salotto* while the others went to see the stone lion, but her plan was foiled by Lucia who insisted volubly that she had to come and threatened to enlist Gino's help in carrying her if she did not come willingly. Joanna could see from Marisa Fallone's sneer that it might be thought she was simply trying to draw attention to herself by her desire to stay behind, so she agreed rather wearily to accompany them.
- In the event, she hung back and walked with Signora Ferrante, a plump attractive woman in her late thirties who had lived in London for varying periods during her married life and was anxious to know if all her favourite shops and restaurants still existed. It was a pleasant undemanding conversation and by the time they had strolled slowly through the grounds and out on to the

cliff-top, the group around the statue had dispersed a little. Sir Bernard and Signor Ferrante were standing, smoking cigars and looking out to sea as they talked in low voices. Gino and Nick were hunting round for pebbles for a competition to see which of them could throw them furthest into the sea.

- Marisa was leaning gracefully against the stone lion, smoking a cigarette. She looked bored and not in the best of tempers, perhaps because Leo was sprawled on the grass some yards away watching amusedly as Lucia tried to make a flower garland from the wild blossoms growing around her. Obviously, she had been inspired by the legend, Joanna thought wryly.
- 'Oh!' Lucia made a noise like an affronted kitten and flung her wilting and despondent blooms away from her. 'I cannot do it. Joanna, will you show me, si?'
- Joanna heaved an inward sigh, and complied, showing Lucia how to pierce the stems carefully with her nail.
- 'This probably isn't the way the girls in the fifteenth century did it, but it's the way I was shown how to make daisy chains when I was a little girl,' she said, kneeling on the ground beside Lucia. Signora Ferrante broke in, concerned about the girls' eyes in the fading light, and Joanna hastily threaded the remaining stems together and placed the finished result on Lucia's head.
- 'Oh, no, Joanna.' Lucia reached up and detached the fragile circlet of flowers with immense care. It is your garland and you must wear it. Bend your head a little. There! Now you look like a bride,' she added triumphantly.
- Joanna felt the colour flood her face. She wanted to tear the inoffensive garland off and trample it, but she knew that such behaviour would only attract unwanted attention. Far better to smile and treat it as the gentle and rather charming joke that her father and the Ferrantes thought it.
- Marisa pulled herself away from the statue. 'Brr, it grows chilly,' she remarked to no one in particular. 'Shall we return to the house?'
- There was a murmur of agreement led by Signora Ferrante, who was drawing her elegant black crocheted shawl further round her plump shoulders. Joanna waited until nearly everyone had moved off, then she pulled the flowers from her hair and let them fall to the ground before going over to her father and tucking her hand through his arm. He was deep in business talk with Signor Ferrante and paid her little attention beyond an absent smile, but Joanna had long inured herself to her father's list of priorities and his casual attitude no longer had any power to upset her.
- They were almost back at the house when Joanna realised that her small kid evening bag was still on the grass at the foot of the statue where she had dropped it when she knelt to help Lucia with her flowers. There was still just sufficient light for her to be able to find it without too much difficulty and with a swift word of explanation, she headed back through the grounds.
- She found it at once and as she bent to pick it up, she noticed that the garland of flowers, already wilting, was lying close by. On an impulse, she gathered up the flowers and stood looking down at them, a forlorn little mass of blossom in the palm of her hand. A bride, Lucia had said, but it was not only brides who had brought flowers to the lion, she thought, remembering what Nick had said. No island girl would have been sufficiently daring to have told the Lion of Saracina that she wanted him to his face. The flowers placed on the statue were like some ancient measure in a dance of courtship, as tentative as the taking of a hand. And if her overlord

decided to leave the flowers ungathered on the statue to die and eventually to fall, then no one would know except the girl herself, and at least her humiliation would be private.

- It was as if some unseen force was propelling Joanna. She felt like a sleepwalker, an automaton without responsibility for her own actions as she walked forward to the base of the statue and stared at the snarling beast.
- Her hand was quite steady as she very gently hung her garland over the raised, threatening paw, but as she stood back her whole body began to tremble violently and picking up her long skirt she began to run almost blindly over the uneven grass back to the brooding mass of the *palazzo*.
- Joanna avoided entering the house by the terrace. She had a pain in her side from running and she knew that she looked hot and untidy. She was wearing her hair piled up on top of her head and she knew that some of the long strands had worked loose and needed attention before she could present herself in the *salotto*. She made her way to the side door that she and Nick normally used to get to the swimming pool and crept unnoticed through the hall, past the half-open door of the *salotto* where she could hear the sound of music mingling with the voices and laughter, and up the stairs.
- Safely in her room, she sank down on her dressing stool and began to remove the pins holding her hair. She shook it free on to her shoulders and sat motionless for a moment, staring at herself in the mirror. Whatever had possessed her to do such a thing? she wondered. At least she could be fairly sure that it would be some time before anyone went near the statue again and by that time her flowers would have died and fallen to the ground again, or been blown away. No one need ever know how foolish she had been. She began to brush her hair with long smooth strokes, finding the action soothing. She was just debating whether to leave it loose for the rest of the evening or to go to the trouble of pinning it up again, when she heard a knock at the door.
- It was probably Lucia come to see what had become of her she thought as she called '*Avanti*,' the words dying in her throat as the door swung open and Leo Vargas walked into the room.
- It was the first time he had been in her room since he had dined with her that first evening, she realised, the clatter of the brush on to the dressing table betraying that she had begun to tremble again.
- 'You—you wanted to speak to me, *signore*?' she managed at last.
- He stood watching her for a moment through half-closed eyes, a slight smile playing about his mouth.
- 'Among other things, yes,' he said, pleasantly, and Joanna desperately moistened her lips with her tongue.
- 'I don't really think we have anything further to say to each other,' she said with a fair assumption of calm.
- 'Oh. but you are wrong, Joanna. We have not even begun.' One of his hands was clenched at his side and as Joanna watched, he held it towards her, palm uppermost. As his fingers opened she closed her eyes in quick dread, knowing what she would see.
- 'Nick told you the old story, didn't he, Joanna? Not just the respectable part of it, which I told

Lucia just now, but the way the island beauties used the statue to signal their desires to their lord. Your flowers may be dead, Joanna, but their message is still potent, *mia*. Don't you want to hear my answer?"

- 'No,' she whispered wretchedly. 'I can't think what I was doing... It was just a foolish joke...'
- 'A joke, *cara*? And yet I warned you, didn't I, not to play any more games with me, or to lie to me. Look at me, Joanna, and tell me to my face it was just another game.'
- 'I can't,' she said wildly, feeling trapped, panic-stricken. 'You have no right...'
- 'Oh, but you can—and I have.' He lifted her from the stool and set her on her feet, his hand tangling in the soft masses of hair, holding her head in an immovable grip.
- 'You're hurting me,' she whispered appealingly, but his face was grim as he stared down at her.
- 'Hurting you? It's a wonder I don't break your neck! You've driven me to the edge of my reason with your moods and whims, but this time you will answer me, and it had better be the truth. You left these flowers?'
- 'Yes.' Her lips quivered at the admission. 'But I never meant—you weren't intended to see them.'
- 'Oh, I don't doubt it, *cara*, and you would have been quite safe if I hadn't missed you when we got back to the house and gone back to look for you, like a good host. I expected to find you lying in the darkness with a sprained ankle. Instead I found this.' He tossed the handful of flowers on to the dressing table. His hand relaxed its cruel grip at the back of her head and slid caressingly to the smooth hollow between her neck and shoulder. 'Now,' his voice sank to a whisper. 'Now tell me that your flowers lied, and that you have no gift for me.'
- He drew her to him, his eyes searching her face with a curious intentness, then he bent, his mouth parting hers with a devastating sensuality that destroyed every pathetic defence she tried to marshal against him.
- She clung to him, every nerve in her body vibrant under his caressing hands, uncaring of everything but the fact that she was in his arms, even if it should prove to be only for a night or an hour. She felt she had no more pride left where he was concerned.
- He drew back at last, those strange golden glints dancing in his eyes again, giving their brilliance an almost magical tenderness as he looked down at her.
- 'You are mine, Joanna.' It was less a question than a statement.
- 'Yes.' She breathed her acquiescence so quietly that he had to bend his head almost to her lips to catch it. He gave a low laugh.
- 'Don't be humble with me, *bella mia*. At the right time I should find your submissiveness a delight, but I don't want you to use it as a pattern for the whole of our life together. What is it, *cara*?' for he had felt the slight involuntary quiver that had run through her at his words. 'Is the fact that I want you for my wife yet another secret that has eluded you?'

- 'You want to marry me?' she echoed wonderingly. His lips twisted mockingly.
- 'Yes—for my sins. What else did you suppose? Oh, don't tell me! I am already acquainted with your unflattering opinion of my morals and motives. Shall I kneel at your feet to convince you?'
- 'No.' She looked up at him, her eyes wide and rather grave. 'But—I didn't realise—you gave me no hint...'
- 'I had not intended to say anything to you so soon. After all, how long have we known each other? I wanted to pay you a long and leisurely courtship, putting all the storms and upheavals of the past behind us, but even that has not worked out as I planned So here I am, *mia* , at the wrong time and in the wrong place asking you to be my wife.'
- His voice became serious. 'But I don't want you to answer me now, at this moment. I want you to think carefully about what it will mean for you. You have sufficient experience with your father to know the sort of life which it will mean for you—the kind of demands that will be made on you. I have never had a permanent home —most of the year I am travelling. Wherever I am there are people whose needs I may have to place before my own. Naturally I want you with me, but there may come a time, if we have children, when I will have to leave you behind sometimes. Do you think you can bear it, Joanna, to take my life and all that it means and make it your own?'
- She looked up at him, her first wild exhilaration at his words tempered by his own seriousness, realising that marriage with him would mean an end to the career and independence she had valued so much. With Leo, there would be time for nothing else but simply being his wife.
- He bent and kissed her, his mouth gentle and almost restrained on hers. It was as if he was setting the seal on a vow that had already been made.
- 'Think about it, *cara* , ' he murmured. 'And in the morning, come to me, and give me your answer.'
- As the door closed behind him, Joanna sank down on to the dressing stool, her knees shaking under her. In just a few moments, her entire world had been turned on its head, she thought in bewilderment. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, staring at herself disbelievingly in her mirror.
- There was no question of her returning downstairs to rejoin the others in the *salotto* now. She was so startled by what had just occurred that she was barely able to think coherently. But she was also unable to ignore or subdue the sweet warm elation which was sweeping through her body, carrying any lingering doubts or misgivings away on a tide of certainty.
- She would be a bride after all, as Lucia had said, and Leo's wife. She closed her eyes, dizzy with happiness, visualising the dark cool arrogance of his face and the tawny glow of his eyes when he looked at her. It was then that she suddenly realised he had not told her that he loved her, but had simply assured himself of her feelings for him. She frowned a little at the disquiet this thought had induced. But what difference did a few words make? she tried to argue with herself lifting her hand in a curiously defensive little gesture to the softness of her mouth, still warm from his kisses. He must love her, otherwise he would not have asked her to marry him.
- But even as the reassurance of the thought warmed her, she remembered Nick's warning that Leo would marry for expediency, and even then would not make a conventional husband. She shrugged away her uneasiness, reminding herself that Leo himself had told her that their life

together would not be an easy one.

- She had a long, slow scented bath, trying to relax herself, but her clamouring thoughts gave her no respite. When eventually she got into bed, she tried to read, but she could not concentrate on the words. On the opposite wall, the painted amber eyes of the first Leo Vorghese watched her with faint enigmatic amusement. It occurred to her that he had been married, and she wondered what his wife had been like. Leo had mentioned her once, she recalled, and with a sense of unease she remembered he had described her as 'that unfortunate girl he married'. A slight shiver ran through her, but she told herself angrily that she was just being ridiculous, giving way to over-heightened emotions. Lucia was right—she was far too romantic, in the worst possible sense of the word.
- She switched off the lights with a determined click, and settled herself, but sleep continued to evade her. Even when she did manage to doze lightly, she awoke with a start after a few moments, conscious of a thudding heart and that strange feeling of disquiet again. Eventually, she sat up and put the lights on again, helping herself to a drink of cool fruit juice from the carafe beside her bed.
- It was a warm night. Perhaps she would sleep more easily if she was cooler. Joanna went into the bathroom and turned on the cold tap, letting the fresh coolness of the water play on her wrists and pressing her wet hands against her throbbing temples.
- For the first time in her vigorous young life she wished she had some kind of tablet to make her sleep, part from anything else, if she got no rest, she would look a complete wreck when she saw Leo in the morning.
- In the morning! She glanced at her wristwatch as she prepared to get back into bed again. It was morning now. She stood very still as the thought came to her. What would Leo's reaction be if she went to him now and gave him her answer? Perhaps he was lying equally sleepless, as disturbed and anxious in his way as she was. Warmth flooded her body as she realised what would be the inevitable outcome if she were to go to his room. For a moment she wavered, trying to assemble all the conventional arguments against such a course of action, but they amounted to very little in the face of her longing for him and her need to be in his arms and feel the hard strength of his body against hers. More than anything she wanted the reassurance of his passion. If she belonged to him completely, then maybe the doubts and fears that were troubling her would disappear.
- Her decision made, she stood up, a slightly mischievous smile curving her mouth. If she went, she thought, she would go in style! She went to the wardrobe and began to search. At last she found what she was looking for— Leo's black silk robe which she had worn during her first hours at the *palazzo*, that and nothing else. She lipped off her nightgown and put on the robe, her hands trembling a little as she secured the sash round her slim waist.
- She moved down the shadowy corridor and out on to the gallery like a small, black ghost. This time there were no hidden eyes to unnerve her, but she told herself ironically that she was probably too het up already to notice if there had been any.
- Her burst of confidence was already ebbing slightly by the time she turned off the gallery into the corridor where Leo's private suite was situated. A low lamp was burning on a small table beside his door but it did not disguise the fact that a bright light was visible under the door itself. So he was awake. Somehow that made it easier. She swallowed nervously as she raised her hand to tap



on the door panel and then paused, her hand transfixed in the middle of the movement. She could hear voices. He was not alone.

- She stood helplessly for a moment, trying to decide what she should do. She could always go back to her own room and choose a less compromising time to give him her answer, or she could hide in the opposite passage where the locked room had been until Leo's visitor left. One thing was certain, she could not be found here half naked, outside his door by anyone else. She knew with utter certainty that apart from her own pride, Leo would find nothing in the least amusing about such an incident.
- With sudden alarm she realised that the voice inside the room were becoming perceptibly louder. His visitor was about to leave. There was no time now to retreat to the safety of her own room now. With a gasp that was half a sob Joanna fled to the other passage, concealing herself behind the sheltering folds of the velvet curtain that masked its entrance.
- The sound that came to her as the door opposite opened was unmistakable although slightly muffled by the curtain. It was a woman's laugh.
- For a moment Joanna stood paralysed with disbelief, then with the utmost caution she pulled the curtain aside just an inch or so she could see.
- Leo stood in the open doorway looking down at Marisa Fallone.
- Joanna was totally motionless. If she had wanted to step out into the corridor to confront them, to accuse, her legs would not have carried her that far. Dumbly she stared at the scene of her betrayal as if etching it on her memory for ever.
- He was almost naked, her anguished brain noted as if recording facts for some emotional computer. His feet and legs were bare and his towelling robe, loosely pulled round him, revealed his brown chest almost to the waist.
- Marisa on the other hand was covered from her neck to her feet, but as the material of her nightgown was totally diaphanous, it was more of a provocation than if she had been nude. But there was one even more striking feature of her attire.
- As Marisa stepped into the corridor, she turned, placing her hand on Leo's arm in her usual intimate manner. She was wearing the most magnificent bracelet of emeralds and diamonds which flashed a rainbow of fire from her wrist as the light caught it.
- '*Ciao, caro.*' The husky seductive voice came clearly to Joanna's ears. 'Don't invite me to your wedding.' She glanced down at the bracelet as she spoke lifting her wrist admiringly, and her soft laugh floated out again.
- Joanna did not hear Leo's reply. She had shrunk away convulsively against the support of the wall, her hands pressed over her ears with savage intensity. She could bear to hear no more.
- After what seemed like an eternity, she realised that the corridor beyond was quiet and that the lights were out. It needed all the physical effort at her command to pull the curtain aside and step out into the passage. For a moment she stood, trying to calm her tortured breathing, like a small hunted creature uncertain of which way to turn.

- She could not cry—that would come later. The first essential now was flight, and to put as many miles as she could between herself and Leo Vargas. Stumbling a little, like a child waking from a nightmare, she went to find her father.

## • CHAPTER NINE



- The phone was ringing as Joanna let herself into the flat. Sighing, she dropped her little case, and kicked off her shoes before lifting the receiver.
- As she had half expected, it was Tony.
- 'Hello, Jo.' His voice as usual was over-cheerful to mask his awkwardness. 'Are you doing anything tonight, because I thought we might take a look at that new Greek place that's just opened. You're *asouvlaka* fan, aren't you?'
- Joanna hesitated. 'I'm a bit tired, actually, Tony. I've had quite a day.'
- 'Oh.' He paused, obviously disappointed but reluctant to press her. 'Yes, of course. How's the new job going, then? When will we be seeing your face in the glossy magazines?'
- 'In a couple of months' time, I think.' Joanna flexed tired muscles. 'Gil Weaver is using me for a spread on furs in *Cavalcade*.
- 'Very luxurious. Sounds fun.'
- 'Mm,' Joanna said noncommittally, remembering the long, hot hours in the stuffy studio, the instant response that was needed for the photographer's every imperious demand, the battle to conceal every trace of irritation and fatigue from the all-seeing eye of the camera. But she would never convince Tony or her father that she was actually working, and working hard. She had realised that from the beginning. Her modelling was just 'Joanna's little hobby.' The only reason her father had agreed to her demands to seek a career of her own was his hope that it might help her to get over the events of recent weeks.
- When they had first returned to London a month before, she had been too bruised emotionally to respond with anything but hostility when Tony had first contacted her, but gradually his diffident persistence had worn away the defensive shell she had built round herself.
- Besides, as Gil Weaver had pointed out, a successful model needed to be seen, and it was perhaps better for her to be seen with Tony, she realised, than with another man who might make demands on her that she was emotionally unable to fulfil.
- It was not altogether fair on Tony, she knew, but he did not seem concerned and she thought wryly that he probably thought if he was patient enough she would eventually come to care for him again. She herself could see no likelihood of this happening and sometimes she felt vaguely anxious about where their relationship was heading.
- 'Look, Jo—put your feet up for half an hour and give me a ring later on if you change your mind

about going out. I'll be here.'

- 'Oh, Tony.' Joanna bit her lip. She was only too aware that he would be there and she wished that he was not always so readily available and attendant on her every whim. She would have felt much happier if he had been more casual in his approach, making it evident that he too had a life, independent of her. As it was, she occasionally felt cornered. 'Well, I'll see how I feel later on. And—thank you for asking me.'
- She replaced the receiver and wandered into the living room of the flat. It was not a large room and it seemed smaller than ever, filled with the cheerful clutter of three girls living in close proximity together. Joanna sighed as she began to tidy up. It was a far cry from the immaculate home she had shared with her father, but she had few regrets about her decision to move into a place of her own. She had answered an advertisement for a third girl to share the flat in the first few days after her return from Saracina, born out of a desire to rid herself of every remnant of her past life. Her father had tried to dissuade her, arguing that she would recover her equilibrium more readily in familiar surroundings, but she had remained adamant.
- He had been incredibly kind and considerate since their return, she thought objectively as she collected the weekend's newspapers into a pile and plumped up the cushions on the studio couch.
- She knew her distress when she had burst into his room that last night on Saracina had thoroughly alarmed him. Up to then she had lived her emotional life pretty much on a superficial level and he had never been exposed to the usual wear and tear on the nervous system that most fathers of girls just out of adolescence had to suffer.
- He had not argued with her or tried to bluster her into changing her mind when she had insisted hysterically that they must leave at once, but had soothed and petted her as if she was a small child again. Nor had he probed too deeply into her reasons for wanting to leave the island so unceremoniously. She had been almost incoherent, she knew, but he seemed to have been able to piece together her stumbling, tearful words and draw his own conclusions.
- He had made all the arrangements for their immediate departure. Joanna had moved like an automaton as she packed. The white-faced, dazed-eyed girl she occasionally caught glimpses of in the mirror seemed to have no connection with herself.
- She had acquiesced mechanically with everything he had said to her until he suggested quite gently that she should at least say goodbye to Leo Vargas, then she had drawn frighteningly close to hysteria again. Eventually he had agreed to make all the farewells that were necessary.
- Joanna had hardly spoken a word during the helicopter flight to the mainland and during the plane journey to London she remained sunk in her seat, staring unseeingly through the cabin window, refusing all offers of food and refreshment.
- When they reached home, she had gone to bed and slept for nearly two days, the sleep of utter physical and mental exhaustion. She wouldn't see a doctor in spite of her father's persuasions. What would he prescribe but a course of tranquillisers, which she despised as a remedy, or a change of scene, which would have been horribly ironic in the circumstances.
- As soon as she felt able to pull herself together, she went to see Gil Weaver to ask if he was still serious about her potential as a photographic model.

- He had pursed his lips a little, looking at the taut, strained lines of her face, and then he had agreed to give her a trial, after warning her with brutal frankness that she would need all her stamina if she was to be successful. He had ordered her to have her hair cut, and sent her to a nearby beauty salon for a course of sauna and massage to dissolve the tension from her body. Then he had ordered her back to his studio and subjected her to a gruelling photographic session which had reduced her to sheer bone-weary limpness. Finally he had told her abruptly that he could use her as a model and advised her on the kind of basic wardrobe and cosmetics she would need to begin with.
- From then on she had been regularly in work with him and she had begun to get calls from other photographers as well. She was thankful for the hard work. When she was busy, it stopped her from thinking. It was only at night, as she lay wakeful in her narrow bed, listening to her flatmates even breathing, that her memories came back to taunt her.
- Now that she could hear to think about it, she sometimes wondered if it would not have been better if she had forced herself to confront Leo there and then, but she told herself resolutely that she had done the right thing. He might have taken her in his arms, and she knew that if he had done so, she would have had no defence against him in spite of the wrong he had done her. Often she woke at night to find tears on her face, aching with her longing for him.
- She dreamed of him often, but the dreams invariably ended in the same way, with the sound of Marisa Fallone's mocking laughter and the sparkle of the jewels flashing on her wrist. Sometimes Joanna wondered bitterly if the bracelet had even been the parting gift she had at first assumed. Perhaps Leo had merely given it to Marisa to sweeten the news of his impending marriage and had no intention of breaking off their relationship completely. What kind of man was he, she asked herself despairingly, to ask her to marry him and then go straight to the arms of another woman?
- Sometimes she asked herself forlornly why Leo had asked her to marry him at all, and why he had not asked Marisa instead as Nick had so confidently predicted. Perhaps he thought that she, Joanna, would be more malleable as a wife, as it was clear that he had no intention of varying his life to conform to any domestic commitments. And it was true that he had never said that he loved her. He obviously felt he was entitled to the best of both worlds—a young and adoring wife and a favourite mistress to provide variety. She supposed that she would have been expected to turn a blind eye to his other amusements once they were married, as Nick had told her, and this hurt worst of all.
- She wandered over to the window and stood looking down into the street. It was unusual for her to have the flat to herself at that time of day and she decided she would take a leisurely bath before Lynne and Fiona got back from work. Both the other girls had a number of boy-friends and on evenings when they were all going out, there was always a rush for first claim on the bathroom. Joanna decided she would probably take Tony up on his offer of dinner at the new restaurant, otherwise she would probably spend the evening on her own with nothing but a variety of television programmes she didn't want to see to interrupt the unhappy tenor of her thoughts.
- Besides, she thought, her mouth twisting in an unwilling smile, it was Lynne's turn to cook the evening meals this week, and her cooking technically and imaginatively fell far below *cordon bleu* standard.

- Tony made no attempt to conceal his delight at her change of heart and arrived in his car punctually to collect her. The new restaurant more than lived up to its reputation and Joanna felt more relaxed than she had done for some time as they drove home. They chatted about a number of topics, including Mary's impending wedding to Paul. Joanna had seen little of either of them since her return and she had been merely relieved when Tony had explained at embarrassed length why Mary did not feel able to ask her to be her bridesmaid.
- The first awkwardness of the evening occurred when Tony parked the car outside the flat. Usually they said a swift and undemonstrative goodnight and parted, but tonight Joanna had an uneasy feeling that he had decided to try and restore their relationship to a warmer level. So she was more than half expecting it when his arm slid round her shoulder and his lips sought hers. Trying not to be too abrupt and hurtful, she freed herself, and to try and avoid the immediate embarrassment asked him if he would like to come up to the flat for some coffee.
- She had already decided this was a mistake before she had fitted her key into the lock. Tony might just think she was providing him with a more comfortable setting in which to pursue his lovemaking. She hoped that Lynne or Fiona would have returned from their respective evenings out, but the flat was empty, and with a little sigh she went into the kitchenette to make the coffee.
- When she returned with the tray of cups, Tony was stretched out on the couch, quite at his ease. He patted the cushions beside him invitingly. She sat down with obvious reluctance, taking care to keep him at a distance while she tried to think of something to say, but he was clearly uninterested in chat and it wasn't long before he tried to take her in his arms. This time she did struggle, twisting herself out of his arms and making no effort to conceal her expression of distaste.
- 'Oh, come off it, Jo,' he said impatiently. His face was flushed and his eyes wandered over her body *with* barely concealed desire. 'You're not Daddy's little girl any more, now. Don't try and kid me that your millionaire friend didn't teach you what it was all about.'
- Joanna faced him coldly. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'
- 'Don't give me that.' His voice was almost jeering. 'I saw the state you were in when you first came back to London. Mother said at the time it was obvious you'd made a complete fool of yourself over a man and that she was surprised Uncle Bernard had allowed it to happen.'
- 'It's incredibly good of your mother to take such a close interest in my affairs.' Joanna was scornful.
- 'It's only natural. After all, you were going to be her daughter-in-law,' he said defensively. 'Anyway—I mean, nothing's really changed as far as I'm concerned, Jo. You don't have to tell me what happened on Saracina. I'd rather not know anyway. I just want you to know that as far as I'm concerned we can just start again where we left off.'
- Joanna shook her head decisively. 'I'm sorry, Tony. It's out of the question.'
- 'Why?' he stared at her. 'I just don't understand you, Jo, I should have thought you'd have welcomed a bit of stability back into your life after what's happened lately. I've told you I'm willing to overlook what happened with your Italian playboy, in spite of what Mother says. I've sowed my wild oats and I suppose you're entitled to do the same...'

- She jumped up and walked rapidly across the room to the door. 'I think you'd better go,' she said quietly.
- He looked at her for a long moment, then got up with a shrug. As he walked past her he reached out with unsuspected force and jerked her into his arms, crushing his mouth on hers in a kiss that seemed to be endless. Joanna fought, but he did not relax his grip and she was gasping for breath when he eventually released her, smiling a little complacently.
- 'You're not made of stone, Jo, no matter what impression you may like to give,' he said. 'I wish I'd been the one to get to you instead of Romeo, but if he's managed to awaken you at last I suppose I ought to be grateful to him.'
- 'Get out,' she said between her teeth, and he raised his hands in a gesture of mock surrender.
- 'Think about it,' he advised quietly. 'I'm in love with you, Jo, even though I've tried not to be.'
- 'You have the oddest way of showing it,' she returned icily.
- He shrugged. 'How long do you expect the kid glove treatment to continue? I have feelings too, Jo.'
- 'Yes.' She took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry, Tony. It was a great mistake my continuing to see you. I believe you when you say you haven't changed. The trouble is, I have, and it's not going to work.'
- 'I can wait,' he said. 'Even broken hearts mend some time.'
- When he had gone she sank down on the couch and began to cry. She had relied on Tony and his support more than she had admitted to herself, but it was as if a favourite brother had turned on her in many ways. She could no longer think of him as a lover and it was useless to encourage him if he thought they could ever resume their former relationship.
- She was still rather quiet and wan when she arrived at Gil's studio the following morning and he noticed at once.
- 'I wish to God you'd get your emotional life together, Joanna,' he said irritably as he adjusted the lights. 'I approve of you losing weight, it's done wonders for your cheekbones and your hips, but this brooding is giving you circles under your eyes, dear, and I don't like it. If the man's giving you trouble, change him.'
- She smiled at him tautly, submitting to having her chin tilted to an impossible angle.
- 'It's not as easy as that.'
- 'Everything's as easy as that, dear, take my word for it.' He stood back and looked at her critically through half-shut eyes. 'Yes, you're a winsome wench, my love. The man who lets you slip through his fingers is a fool. You wouldn't care to trade him in for me, I suppose.'
- She had to laugh. 'Thanks, Gil, but no thanks.'
- 'Ah well.' He was totally unabashed. 'No harm in trying. Now then, darling. Let's try and make



this rag you've got on look as if it was actually designed and sewn for some woman to wear.'

- She was just emerging from the dressing room after the session when his receptionist called to her. 'Your father telephoned, Joanna. He's been held up and he wants you to meet him at his office for lunch instead of the restaurant.'
- 'Oh,' Joanna digested this. Her father made a point of inviting her to lunch with him two or three times a week and she still dined with him and acted as his hostess when he needed her. In some ways she saw more of him since she had left home than ever before, and their relationship had improved, she felt.
- He had rarely referred to what had happened on Saracina or asked explicitly what had happened to prompt her sudden, agonised desire for flight. Leo Vargas name was never mentioned by either of them. But at the same time, she had the feeling that he had been disappointed in the way things had turned out and that he had been hoping for a totally happier outcome to their time on the island.
- She decided to walk round to his office. Although summer was beginning to advance into autumn and the first leaves were falling from the trees in the squares as she passed by, it was still very warm, encouraging one to dawdle. Even though she had not done any more sunbathing since she had arrived back in England, her Mediterranean tan showed no signs of fading, although Gil grumbled about it constantly, muttering that it made her look altogether too healthy for the ethereal image he wanted her to put over:
- She had to show her pass when she arrived at the large building where her father's office was situated and the security men smiled and touched their caps to her as she went in. She crossed the foyer and took the lift to the top floor, avoiding the general offices and traversing the thickly carpeted corridor to the small but comfortable room which housed her father's civilian secretary, Mrs Warner.
- She was working busily, but she looked up with a smile as Joanna appeared in the doorway.
- 'Hello, Miss Leighton. Wasn't that your picture I saw in *Lady fair* last week?'
- Joanna laughed. 'I'm surprised you recognised me under all that make-up.'
- Mrs Warner's eyes twinkled. 'Well, I daresay I wouldn't have done—it was pretty lurid—but Sir Bernard pointed it out to me, as a matter of fact. I think he was secretly rather proud of it.'
- 'That's news to me.' Joanna lifted her eyebrows smilingly. 'Is he free? Can I go in?'
- Mrs Warner hesitated and Joanna wondered if she had imagined the rather odd look the secretary gave her, but her tone was quite normal.
- 'Of course, Miss Leighton. I was told to see you went straight in.'
- Joanna pushed open the door that led to her father's private office and walked in. The blinds had been partially lowered over the large windows to shut out the still strong sunlight and for a moment Joanna thought the room was empty. Then she saw the tall figure of a man outlined against the light and she knew even before he spoke that it was not her father.

- 'So we meet again, Joanna.'
- She tried to speak, but words would not come, then she turned, her eyes blinded by a rush of indignant tears, fumbling for the doorhandle.
- But before she could escape, he was beside her, his hand closing over hers and wrenching it away from the door, then turning her forcibly to face him at last.
- 'No, *mia* .' His voice was quiet, but there was a note in it that made her tremble. 'There will be no more running away.'
- 'Let me go!' she cried, trying to free herself, but his grip on her arms tightened inexorably.
- 'No, I don't want to make the same mistake twice, *mia* , I don't intend to let you go again—ever.'
- 'You may be the master of Saracina,' she said, her voice shaking, 'but you are now on British government property, and if you don't let go of me, I shall have you thrown out of the building!'
- His teeth flashed in a sardonic grin. 'From that window no doubt, *cara* . You little fool, do you really think I could just walk in here and take over your father's office without his knowledge and permission?'
- 'My father—knows you are here?' She could hardly believe the enormity of the betrayal. Her father knew she had fled from Saracina because of this man. Why was he helping him now, when he knew she felt no differently?
- 'Naturally, *cara* . When I arrived in London last night I went straight to his house. I hoped to see you there and then, but he told me you no longer lived there. We talked and he tried to telephone you at your new address, but there was no reply.'
- 'No, there wouldn't have been—we were all out—there was no one to answer,' she said hurriedly, aware that stress was making her incoherent. His nearness was a torment to her. No matter how hard she had tried to drive him out of her heart and her mind, she knew she had not succeeded.
- He put his hand under her chin, lifting her face and forcing her to meet his gaze in the old imperious way.
- 'Why did you run away from me, Joanna? And why are you still trying to avoid me now? The last time we met, you promised me your body. I thought you had also given me your heart. Was the gift too much to ask of you? If so you should have had the courage to tell me, *cara* , not run away.'
- He paused for a moment, but she said nothing, so he continued, 'I asked you a question, Joanna, that night at the *palazzo* . I have come for my answer. Will you be my wife?'
- She looked up at the arrogant lines of the face that had tormented her dreams, sleeping and waking, for so long, and two great tears rolled down her cheeks as she slowly shook her head.
- 'I—see.' His breath escaped in a long sigh, as if he had been holding it for her answer. 'May I be

told why? You see, *cara*, I thought you loved me.'

- 'I—did.' She had almost said 'I do', but that would have been disastrous. She felt as if she was bleeding to death from some deep unseen wound.
- 'But I asked too much of that love in wanting you to share my life?' He stared down at her for a long moment. 'You are very young, aren't you, *cara*, I was afraid I was rushing you too much.'
- 'I wasn't afraid to share your life,' she cried. 'It was you I couldn't bear to share.'
- It was out now, and she did not know whether to be glad or sorry.
- '? His eyebrows lifted questioningly. 'But I warned you, Joanna, of the demands there would be on my time from other people. If it wasn't for those demands I would have followed you to London weeks ago.'
- 'I didn't mean that,' she said wretchedly.
- 'What, then?'
- 'Marisa Fallone,' Her voice faltered almost to a whisper and he had to bend his head sharply to catch the words. When she dared look at him again, his face was bleak.
- 'I never pretended to you that I was a saint, Joanna,' he said quietly. 'But that is over. I give you my word.'
- 'Perhaps it is now,' she said with difficulty. 'But it wasn't, Leo, that night you asked me to marry you. You went from my room—to her. Don't deny it. I—I couldn't bear that. You see, I saw you both together in the doorway of your room. She was wearing the bracelet you had given her. After that—I just couldn't face you again. I had to run away,' she finished on a little rush of words.
- 'What nonsense is this? A bracelet? I gave Marisa no bracelet'
- 'But she was wearing it that night. And it was about all she was wearing,' she added with a touch of school-girlish spite.
- 'Her choice of nightwear does tend to be exotic,' he agreed solemnly. 'But I'm sure she did not realise it was so public a matter. And you are right about the bracelet, I remember it now. But I'm surprised you could think I would be guilty of giving any woman so tasteless a piece of jewellery.'
- 'Then who did give it to her?'
- His lips twitched slightly. 'I wasn't so indelicate as to ask,' he said almost casually. 'But I was given a strong hint that it was a new admirer who was more willing than I to give her the single-minded devotion she feels she deserves.'
- 'But why was she in your room?'
- 'I'll answer that question with another, *mia*. Why was she on Saracina at all—because I certainly

did not invite her.'

- She stared at him and he gave a rather grim nod.
- 'Yes,*mia* . My dear young cousin, Nick. I told you he wanted you for himself, didn't I? I'd played into his hands, of course, by allowing him to be your constant companion, and when I was free to pursue you myself, he tried to put a spoke in my wheel by telephoning Marisa in Rome and inviting her to the *palazzo* . Once she arrived, I could hardly snub her. Besides,' he looked at her slightly quizzically, 'I wanted to see if I could make you jealous.'
- 'Nick told me that you were going to marry her. He said that I was—an embarrassment to you.' Colour stained her cheeks. 'He said all you would ever want of me would be an affair—but that you knew I wasn't just another girl, and so you had to be careful.'
- 'He was right about one thing,*mia* . I did know, right from the start, that you were not just any girl. And I admit that I did want you very badly. But it was impossible,*cara* . With Damaryk hidden in the *palazzo* and agents from the States and Britain arriving to question him at all hours of the day and night, I couldn't let myself give personal matters priority. And you didn't help with your determination to ruin me, if you could. I had to fight hard at times to convince the security people that you weren't an agent from the other side.'
- He smiled slightly. 'I couldn't let them know there was no real reason for you to be on the island, otherwise you would probably have been arrested. But as luck would have it, I had already arranged that you should be my guest and I was able to tell them that you had come earlier than expected because we were in love—and you could not bear to be parted from me any longer.'
- Joanna glared at him. 'And of course they believed you.' she said with tremendous irony.
- 'Fortunately, yes.' He smiled lazily at her outraged expression. 'And it wasn't so far from the truth. I think I fell in love with you,*mia* , the first time I saw you.'
- Her cheeks were hot again as she remembered the circumstances under which he had seen her, before she had regained consciousness on the couch in his study.
- 'I don't particularly want to be reminded of that,' she said stiffly, and he raised his eyebrows mockingly.
- 'No? Shall I tell you when I first saw you? You were sitting on a rock, combing your hair like a sea nymph—quite alone and very happy. Not at all like the self-willed little socialite I was expecting to see.'
- She gave a little cry. 'I thought someone was watching me.'
- He nodded calmly. 'I made sure you didn't see me. Much later, I saw you combing your hair again, by the side of the swimming pool, and you looked at me with all your heart in your eyes. That was the first time I had any reason to think you might love me in return.'
- 'I thought I had given you plenty of reason to think it,' she confessed, and his mouth twisted a little.
- 'Because you responded when I made love to you? I am not wholly without experience with

women,*mia* , and I knew I could make you want me, but I wasn't so sure I could make you love me.'

- His gaze made her suddenly shy and she stared at the floor instead.
- 'But you still haven't explained why Marisa was in your room. You must have invited her...'
- 'There was a time when Marisa did not have to wait for an invitation,' he said frankly. 'But on this visit I made it clear to her that everything was over between us. I didn't go to her room, or ask her to mine, so in the end she came to me to point out that I was in danger of losing her through my neglect to this other man. I told her I had asked you to marry me and we wished each other happiness and parted.'
- His voice gentled. 'I have told you the truth, Joanna. Why have you made us waste all this time? All you had to do was to ask me the next day and I would have told you everything. But when you went without a word, I thought you had simply decided to have your revenge at last—to make me suffer as you once said you would. Haven't we both suffered enough at each other's hands,*mia* ?'
- She was really crying now, regret for her own foolishness and lack of trust mingling with relief that she had been so disastrously wrong.
- 'Ah, no,*cara* .' There was no mistaking the tenderness in his voice. 'The time for tears is past. I ask you again, Joanna, will you be my wife?'
- 'Do you really want me?' she asked shyly, as he brushed the tears from her wet cheeks with his hand.
- He smiled and for the first time drew her into his arms, moulding her slender body against his.
- 'Can you doubt it,*mia* ?' he murmured against her hair. 'I am more than willing to give you proof here and now, if you wish, and if the good Signora Warner can be persuaded not to interrupt us.'
- 'Leo!' she protested, blushing.
- 'Shocked,*mia* ? Yet you have not explained to my satisfaction just how you happened to be outside my room that night to see Marisa,' he teased her.
- She bent her head. 'I—I'd come to give you my answer.'
- 'And not merely with words? Be honest.'
- 'No,' she looked up at him and smiled, her own longing for him showing openly in her tear-wet eyes. 'No, Leo. Not merely with words.'
- 'My love and my wife,' he whispered, and kissed her.

# About this Title

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